

ABSTRACT

ADDRESSING THE UNSPEAKABLE: THE FERAL CHILD AS LITERARY DEVICE

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, EDGE HILL
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This project aims to explore the fictional image of the feral child through practice-based and critical research. The novel *Consider The Lilies*, comprising the main body of the thesis, explores the relationship between Vicky, a woman who suffered isolated confinement as a child, and Jack, the main narrator, as he searches for his lost identity.

In the critical component, analysis of the image using historical perspectives locates its function within the text as one of radical critique, reviewing existing social practices from a defamiliarised perspective. Exploration of contemporary texts focuses this critique on the role of language in the formation of the individual consciousness. The application of psychoanalytic theories, in particular the work of Julia Kristeva on the semiotic chora, identifies the function of the fictional image of the feral child as a catalyst permitting the expression of the semiotic in the text. An examination of a specific text, Jill Dawson's *Wild Boy* (2003) tests this proposition and evaluates the poetics involved in the composition.

The simultaneous development of practice-based and critical research is discussed in the chapter on the poetics of wildness which traces the writing process and its motivation. The concluding arguments consolidate the position that the fictional image of the feral child acts as a catalyst permitting an address to the unspeakable and the expression of the semiotic in the text which carries a revolutionary potential but recognise that this image is only one means of making such address, situating this research as part of an ongoing poetics which will continue to influence future writing.

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DECLARATION

This thesis is entirely my own work and has not been submitted in any form for the award of a Higher Degree at any other educational institution.

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Introduction and Overview of the Research Project

This study began with a chance reading of documented cases of feral children in Michael Newton's book *Savage Girls and Wild Boys* (2002) which then led me to read fiction about feral children and to reflect on reasons why the feral child is a popular image in fiction. Feral children have been discovered regularly throughout history,¹ occasioning the publication of anthropological and sociological studies into the nature of the feral child and into the possibilities of rehabilitating such children into civilised communities. Very little research exists on the wealth of fiction that has been written about feral children.²

This research project aims to analyse the image of the feral child in fiction and to use the findings to write a novel which explores the functions of the feral child in the text. The insights gained will, at the same time, inform the construction of a poetics which, although presented separately in this thesis, is in fact a seamless accompaniment to the creative work, *Consider The Lilies*, which forms the major part of the thesis. Despite this,

¹ One hundred and thirty four reported cases of feral children are listed by Andrew Ward (2009a) on the website www.feralchildren.com beginning with Aegisthus, an Italian goat boy discovered in 250A.D. and continuing till the present day with the report of a confined Russian girl Natasha Mikhailova in 2009. However, this list almost certainly represents only the most famous reported cases and is heavily weighted in numbers towards the last hundred years, no doubt partly due to advances in reporting techniques and record keeping..

² Ward (2009b) lists 54 works of adult fiction. Most are 20th century but a few early tales are included going as far back as the twelfth century text *Journey of the Soul: The Story of Hai Bin Yaqzan*, by Abu Tufail which tells the story of a wild boy suckled by a doe, and which is listed as the English translation by Dr Riad Kocache (1982). The list does not include oral myths and folk tales which we may surmise made up the bulk of early fiction about feral children.

the poetics exists in its own right and as such its influence on future writing will be considered.

I shall use a variety of perspectives - historical, contextual and theoretical - in order to ascertain the relevance of the image to contemporary writing. The focus of the study will foreground the major characteristics of the image of the feral child – lack of speech and amorality – relating wildness and wordlessness to the emergence of concerns with the pre-linguistic and the formation of the speaking subject in contemporary literature.

I will argue that the image of the feral child can be productive in the construction of a literary text, which I define as creating not only a radical questioning of and resistance to established social practices, but as permitting the expression of hidden aspects of being that leads to a re-thinking of the self and its relation to the outside world. In other words, I will examine the figure of the feral child for a revolutionary potential in the sense used by Julia Kristeva in her definition of the literary text (Kristeva, 1984). This perspective, applied to the analysis of a specific text, will provide insights into the individual writing process and assist the development of a personal poetics which attempts to address the semiotic, the unspeakable.

Part A is thus concerned with research into the image of the feral child and with the writing process that informs the production of the creative work. Chapter One comprises an examination of the spectrum of fiction about feral children from which a focused research field is selected for further study. Deeper analysis reveals a contemporary emphasis on the relation between wildness and wordlessness.

Chapter Two examines this relation through psychoanalytical perspectives, foregrounding Julia Kristeva's definition of the semiotic chora and the revolutionary

potential of the literary text. A paradigm emerges for creating the conditions to produce a literary text which permits expression of the semiotic chora.

Chapter Three applies this perspective to a specific contemporary text, Jill Dawson's *Wild Boy* (2003), in order to test the validity of such a perspective and its capacity to invest the fictional feral child with revolutionary potential.

Chapter Four retrospectively discusses how this research into the fictional image of the feral child has been instrumental in the development of a poetics, contemporaneously with the composition of the novel *Consider The Lilies*. Developing a poetics involves a view of writing as process, including an examination of its historical context. It is necessary to place one's writing practice in a relationship to what has been written before as well as to what might be written in the future; thus finally the influence of this poetics on future writing practice is explored.

In Part B the novel *Consider The Lilies* is the concrete product of the poetics developed from the research conducted in Part A, although this is not to say that one part preceded the other. Although they are bound together in this thesis, in reality each stands apart, with the publication of *Consider The Lilies* as a separate volume and the incorporation of a poetics of wildness into a future and constantly changing writing practice.

PART A

**ADDRESSING THE UNSPEAKABLE:THE FERAL CHILD AS
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A CRITICAL EXAMINATION

Chapter One: The Feral Child In Fiction: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Themes

This chapter will explore historical perspectives on feral children and the way fiction writers have manipulated such perspectives. Beginning with some definitions of the phrase ‘feral child,’ I will discuss generalisations culled from an overview of fiction about feral children and identify major themes which writers explore through the image of the feral child. A focused area of research will be drawn in order to analyse these themes in greater detail and define their relevance to a contemporary poetics of writing.

Defining The Feral Child

Candland (1993) speaks of feral children as ‘Children raised outside culture’(3) but such a vague definition is over-simplistic. Ward (2009a) distinguishes between wild and confined children. Wild children are those who have developed in a non-human environment and confined children have, for various reasons, been imprisoned by a parent or captor from a very early age without being exposed to culture and communication.

Subdivisions exist within these categories. Wild children comprise those nurtured by wild animals, most commonly bears, apes or wolves, and children who have lived alone in a wild environment, sometimes labelled ‘isolated’. A recent category of wild child concerns the development of urban feralism where children have been abandoned in the cities of collapsing social systems such as that of the USSR, to live as best they may, alone or with packs of dogs as in the case of Ivan Mishakov (Russia 1998). Confined children are found on a continuum that slides from almost total cultural and sensory

deprivation at one end to severe child neglect at the other and the degree to which they exhibit the characteristics of feralism, the inability to use language or social skills and the reliance on sensory skills common to animals, will correspond to their place on this sliding scale.³

A second meaning of the word ‘feral’ is that of a being which was cultivated but has returned to the wild. This further complicates attempts to define the feral child. Does the term refer to an innate human nature which has somehow been withheld from the child, or is it only to be applied to children who have received some nurture and culture before being abandoned? As feral children are generally unable to speak we cannot know what abilities they had before being abandoned. Their language difficulties and amoral tendencies may be a result of feralism, or it may be that a pre-existing developmental problem led their parents to abandon or confine them in the first place.

It is clear from this that any definition of the feral child is going to be shrouded in ambiguity and supposition and contain subjective, cultural and contextual influences. It is perhaps this very ambiguity that fascinates both factual researchers and fiction writers. It is possible to explore the image in fiction without the ethical issues involved in scientific research on real individuals. We need, however, to recognise that the way the feral child is represented in fiction is the result of selective choices that mirror the concerns of the writer rather than any effort to foreground the plight of the feral child.

³ Reports of confined children occur fairly regularly in major civilised communities. Ward (2009a) documents 21 cases between 2000-2009, six of which occurred in the USA, but such reports may represent only a small proportion of actual cases and exclude occurrences such as the eight year captivity of Natascha Kampusch at the hands of Wolfgang Priklopil from 1998-2006, or the discovery of Josef Fritzl’s daughter Elisabeth and her children in 2008 after an eighteen year confinement by her father in Amstetten, Austria. These confined children are not classed as feral because they had access to culture via television and/or were permitted limited access to the outside world and, in the cases of Elisabeth Fritzl and Natascha Kampusch, had been reared in a normal cultural environment before their confinement.

The scarcity of written records prior to the seventeenth century means that early accounts became fictionalised in folklore, myth and legend. Even the written accounts of the eighteenth century, detailing the more famous cases of feral children in that period, were heavily embroidered with fictional details for the titillation of the public or to justify the beliefs of the authors (Douthwaite, 2002).

What then draws fiction writers and their readers to the feral child? The attempt to define human nature has pre-occupied mankind throughout written history and despite varying definitions over time, it remains a much debated topic today. Factors thought to distinguish humans from animals - the desire for knowledge, the ability to use language, the ability to make and use tools, self consciousness and the ability to transmit culture - have all proved inadequate since studies of animals have shown that such characteristics are not unique to humans (Candland, 1993:3).

The blurred border between animal and human creates an ambiguity that is a fruitful area for fiction writers to explore questions of being. The feral child, indisputably human, yet visibly animal, is a perfect example, threatening us with the fear of our animal qualities while at the same time making us aware of the bonds of civilisation, the loss of freedom which is the price of culture. Ambiguity also creates an arena for the criticism of established social practices, by demolishing certainties with the presentation of possible alternatives.

The way in which fiction writers have used the image varies historically, although I will show that the same themes weave in and out of history to re-surface in contemporary literature in modified form.

Historical Views Of Feral Children

Early myth and folklore celebrate the animal-within-human personality. Tales abound of heroes and gods raised by animals, such as Zeus, who was suckled by a goat, and Paris of Troy who was raised by a bear. While the fearsome side of animality is recognised in figures of fauns, satyrs and hybrid monsters like the Minotaur, the accent is on its power which confers superhuman qualities on these feral children when harnessed to their civilised aspects.

However, White (1972) argues that the wild man becomes a figure of loathing with the advent of Christianity. While on the one hand mankind is recognised as redeemable, thus always allowing for the possibility of rehabilitation, the wild man is seen as embodying the fall from God's grace, and in fact representing a turning away, an embracing of all the passions which should be rooted out in order to obtain favour with God. White's analysis of European folklore, travelling plays, morris and mummary in the medieval and renaissance periods, shows how the cult figure of the wild man is universally depicted as an object to be attacked, overcome and usually put to death at the climax of the drama.

In her studies of eighteenth-century feral children, Julia Douthwaite (1994, 1997, 2002) argues that with the Enlightenment ideal of man as master of his own progress towards perfection through reason, the monstrous image of the feral child undergoes a radical shift, taking on aspects of innocence and uncorrupted nature closely related to Rousseau's ideas on education and perfectibility and is also linked to the concept of the Noble Savage. Although ostensibly celebrating this innocent image, an explosion of texts such as 'The Savage' (Anonymous, 1726), and *Imirce, A Child Of Nature* (Laurent, 1787) in fact manipulated it to satirise the civilisations of the day and expose corruption within the church and the aristocracy (Douthwaite, 2002). Texts from this period also explore

the credibility of religion as it came under question from rational and logical reasoning and scientific discovery. Debate was fierce as some texts such as *Imirce* challenged the authority of the Church, while others, such as *Automathes* (Kirkby, 1745), criticised corruption within religious bodies but defended belief in God and God-given nature.

This critical use of the image is particularly relevant to the way we manipulate literary devices in contemporary fiction in order not simply to reflect a given reality but to provide an arena of radical critique. For this reason I will return to this period in the next section.

The early nineteenth century shows no fictional tales of feral children, yet the two most fictionalised real cases, Victor of Aveyron, an isolated wild boy discovered in woods near Paris in 1799 and Kaspar Hauser, a confined boy of about sixteen, released onto the streets of Nuremburg in 1828, occurred in this period. Instead we have detailed reports on the lives of these children. Dr J.G.M. Itard published two papers on his rehabilitative work over eight years with Victor at the Deaf-Mutes Institute in Paris. The diaries and journals of Kaspar Hauser's various benefactors, together with the later writings of the adult Hauser himself, provide a rich source of information about his life. The presence of these painstaking accounts cannot alone, however, account for the many re-workings of them in twentieth and twenty-first century fiction and, for this reason, more attention to them will also be paid in the next section.

Another cluster of fiction about feral children occurs during the period surrounding the two world wars with a succession of jungle stories similar in setting to *Tarzan Of The Apes* (Rice Burroughs, 2006) first published in 1912 and *Jungle Book* (Kipling, 2003) first published in 1894. Both Rice Burroughs and Kipling posit the presence of natural laws that govern human and animal behaviour but suggest the supremacy of the human

feral child over the most powerful of animals. Kipling's child Mowgli must submit to his animal elders and learn the laws and customs of jungle society until he develops the adult human qualities, combining strength with intelligence, which will mark him out as a ruler. However, in the Tarzan legends, Rice Burroughs attributes supreme intelligence not simply to the human nature of the feral child, but the fact that he is a white European of aristocratic breeding which endows him with superior powers of reasoning. Such fictions reflect not only the assumptions of Social Darwinism and the developing science of eugenics, but in their preoccupation with the presence of fixed natural laws and orders of superiority, may harbour fears of unrest both in the working masses at home and in the demands for independence from the colonies, concerns about territorialism and the prospect of war. Here the definition of the feral child is one of the fair-minded but superior human being. He learns from and respects animals and the law of the jungle but his ultimate destiny is to rule them because of his human intellect.

From the mid- twentieth century to the present day, the image of the feral child returns to a position of ambiguity, provoking a radical questioning of human nature and contemporary civilisation. Julia Kristeva argues that certain types of literature confront social structures and their ideological manifestations and places clusters of such literature at periods of change in the mode of production (Kristeva, 1984). I would agree that periods of rapid social and economic change create instability and provoke intense debate which is explored in the literary productions of the time. This may explain the parallels between the satires of the eighteenth century at the dawn of the industrial revolution and the radical questioning to be discerned in late twentieth and twenty-first century society with its rapid technological developments and associated transformation of social structure.

For these reasons I have chosen to compare selected fiction about feral children which seems to incorporate such questioning from these two periods in greater detail in order to explore the revolutionary potential which Kristeva claims for specific forms of modern literature and to consider how such potential may be incorporated into a consistent writing practice.

Eighteenth-century and contemporary fiction about feral children compared

In 1726 Peter, a wild boy discovered in the woods near Hanover, Germany, was paraded through the courts of Europe as a novelty to amuse the aristocracy. Subsequently a number of fictional tales used the figure of the boy to satirise the fashions and social mores of the upper classes. The innocence and simplicity assigned to the image in these fictions served as a standpoint from which to foreground corruption and decadence, using the stylistic device of defamiliarisation as an effective critical tool to present an alternative and often scathing version of the contemporary society through the innocent view of the feral child.

For example, an anonymous poem, 'The Savage' published in the year of Peter's arrival in London, directs the court of King George I to educate Peter but not to 'taint his spotless heart' and ends by declaring, 'He whose lustful, lawless mind/ Is to reason's guidance blind/ Smooth and courtly though he be/ He's the savage, only he' (Anonymous, 1726).

The technique of defamiliarisation is used to splendid effect in the satire *The Most Wonderful Wonder* (Swift, 1726), also published at the time of Peter's tour, where a wild boy (Peter) is followed to London by his foster mother, a bear. Peter and his mother

struggle to find explanation for the customs and beliefs of the community in which they find themselves. Peter tells his mother:

Man stripped is the most defenceless and most sheepish of all animals; but when he is decked with birds' feathers and sheep's wool and laid over with a shining earth which they adore as we do the sun and has perfumed himself with the excrements of a civet-cat, his pride makes him look with contempt on any other animal [...] the glittering earth I mentioned is their god [...] so zealous are they in their adorations of this their deity [...] that they offer one another up in sacrifice in which by mutual wounds both priest and victim fall (ibid:9).

This same defamiliarisation is used in contemporary fictions about feral children. The film *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (Herzog, 1974)⁴ manipulates Kaspar's inability to communicate and his lack of social skills in order to present a character who confronts the accepted rules and regulations of the small town in which he appears. This is not a conscious, reasoned confrontation, however. It is simply that Kaspar's being, his inability to fit into the civic system poses an undefined threat to the town officials. Kaspar's silences, his meaningless expression, expose the arbitrary nature of social rules just as

⁴ The film is based on the discovery of a sixteen year old boy, Kaspar Hauser on the streets of Nuremburg in 1828. When found, Kaspar could only speak a few phrases, but soon gained fluency and was able to tell of his prolonged confinement. He was adopted by several benefactors; Georg Friedrich Dahmer, Anselm von Feuerbach and the English Earl of Stanhope. He later wrote fluent memoirs but was murdered in December 1833. Rumours abounded that he was in fact heir to the throne of Baden and had been hidden away for reasons of political intrigue. This has never been substantiated but the romantic elements of the case may be responsible along with the considerable documented information in Hauser's own memoirs as well as those of his patrons, for the number of fictional texts written about him which include 'Kaspar Hauser' a poem by David Constantine (1994) and *Prince Ishmael* by Marianne Hauser (1964) as well as the texts discussed in this chapter. For a full account of Kaspar Hauser see Michael Newton's *Savage Girls and Wild Boys* (2002) Ch.5 pp. 128-181.

effectively as the satiric discourse of the eighteenth century texts. Here language itself is the focus of criticism contrasting Kaspar's silence and fragmented speech with the endless reciting of rules and writing of reports by the town officials as they try to deal with him. The conclusion of the film, where the town officials are only happy when the autopsy after Kaspar's death suggests that some brain deformity was responsible for his condition, confronts the way reason and language are used to define realities in ways that may be used to support specific ideologies, in this case established viewpoints about human nature and the values of civic society. Here we begin to see an explicit criticism of language and reason as factors in shaping and distorting reality in contrast to the eighteenth century's undefined concerns with a general corruption. The same criticism is employed in another fiction based on Kaspar Hauser, the 1967 play *Kaspar* by Peter Handke which will be examined in greater detail below.

The novel *Knowledge of Angels* by Jill Paton Walsh (1994), set on a mythical medieval island, is less explicit in this respect, dealing partly with corrupted viewpoints within religious faith in the inquisitorial procedures of the established church and contrasting these with the feral girl Amara's simplicity. Although Amara's language is fragmented, language per se is not foregrounded as a factor in shaping the dogmas of church and state. The novel turns on the question of whether human nature includes an innate knowledge or recognition of God which informs and guides the construction of human society. Although religion and reason are pitted against one another in the text, and a critique of both is implied in the escape of Amara into the wild at the conclusion of the novel, in many respects this book closely resembles eighteenth-century texts such as *Automathes* (Kirkby, 1745) and *Imirce, A Child of Nature* (Laurent, 1787). At first examination, *Imirce* with its revolutionary embrace of anarchy and its call for the

destruction of both church and state, appears unrelated to Walsh's careful and delicate evaluation, yet the confrontation of secular and religious bodies through the defamiliarised viewpoint of a feral girl is similar in essence. Taken to a church service for the first time, Imirce describes what she sees:

This man (the priest) having bawled till he was tired, walked forward with two plates in his hand, a small and a large one. The people put some of what is called money in the large plate [...] and were permitted to kiss the small one. Everyone then returned, well satisfied to have kissed a plate. This was the more singular as all these people had plates at home which they might have kissed without a farthing's expense (Laurent, 1787:113).

Compare this with Amara's first visit to church in *Knowledge Of Angels*:

Per Aldonze smiled at her and raised his hand to make the sign of the cross over her; she raised her eyes to follow his gesture and her features suddenly twisted into their wolfish form; she rolled her eyes back in her head, shrank away from him and uttered a long piercing whimper Then, breaking away from Sor Agnete and Josefa, who each tried to hold her she fled, taking to all fours before she was half way to the door [...]

Sor Agnete looked on, deeply troubled [...] she stood where Amara had stood [...] Above the altar [...] hung the great crucifix [...] Sor Agnete had prayed in front of this crucifix many times a day, every day of her life for twenty years, but now she realized for the first time [...] that if you did not know it was an image of love [...] if you did

not know of the resurrection and the life, what you would see [...] would be an image of a man viciously tortured and horribly done to death (Walsh, 1994:224).

Both texts emphasise the purity of the feral child, of uncorrupted human nature, although Walsh does qualify this purity with amoral aspects of Amara's nature, incorporating the apparently unmotivated murder of her companion in the wild, a reference to eighteenth-century accounts of the French feral girl, Memmie le Blanc.⁵ Amara returns to the clean solitude of the mountains from whence she came. *Imirce*, originally a French text, written shortly before the outbreak of the French Revolution, concludes with a passionate and direct critique of the old society, clearly based on the contemporary image of the Noble Savage and Rousseau's ideas about human nature, perfectibility and education. 'Your legislators have supposed man wicked but he is naturally good; he is like a child in fetters who shakes his chains and strives to break them asunder' (Laurent, 1787:164). The link to Rousseau is confirmed by the name of the speaker, Emilor (*Imirce*'s lover), an intertextual reference to the eponymous hero of Rousseau's novel *Emile* (Rousseau, 1911).

On the other hand, *Automathes* (Kirkby, 1745) uses the same figure of the isolated feral child to convey a different message. The text begins with the criticism of corrupt social and ecclesiastical systems in a discussion comparing their two cultures between the adult Automathes and some visitors to the country which he rules with fairness and wisdom. However, his description of his feral childhood as a shipwrecked survivor on an

⁵ Memmie le Blanc was an adolescent feral girl discovered in 1731 near the village of Songi, France. After being placed in a convent and rehabilitated by nuns, she spoke fluent French and was able to tell how she had roamed the countryside with another feral girl whom she had one day clubbed to death in an argument. For a discussion of her life, see Douthwaite, J, (2002) *The Wild Girl, Natural Man and the Monster* pp. 29-50.

uninhabited island, ascribes his acquisition of knowledge and wisdom to an innate knowledge of God, fixed and pre-ordained, requiring only the human recognition of it to make it functional, rather than to any natural developments. Like his nineteenth-century counterpart Tarzan of the Apes (Rice Burroughs, 2006), the young Automathes is able to educate himself in all the scientific disciplines by observation of rational and logical design in the natural environment, which in Automathes' case is recognised as the hand of God. 'Thus from the works of nature and providence, I was naturally led, by my internal monitor to the knowledge of the First Mover' (Kirkby, 1745:119).

Although *Imirce*, *Automathes* and *Knowledge Of Angels* all criticise corruption and celebrate the purity of feral children, their viewpoints lead to different conclusions about human nature and the need for social change. In Paton Walsh's novel the whole question is shelved as cruelty and bloodshed are seen as the unacceptable result of the insoluble dilemma between faith and reason, and the feral girl exits the text, remaining voiceless, her function apparently to expose the limitations of both faith and reason, without suggesting any alternative besides withdrawal from social life into the symbolical purity of solitary life in the mountains.

Later eighteenth-century texts about feral children consolidate the thinking of the Enlightenment and ideas about education and perfectibility. In his novel *Emile*, first published in 1762, Rousseau argues that children have a pure and natural reason that must be carefully nurtured to foster discovery, rather than trusting in rote-learning without explanation.

However, Dr J.M.G. Itard's account of his work with the feral boy Victor of Aveyron, written between 1799 and 1806, in some respects represents an attempt to refute or at least to qualify this thesis and proceeds from the observation that the child's nature was

purely animal and that the development of any moral sense depends entirely on civilisation and education (Itard, 1972). Although the account is factual, I include it in the discussion because it has been repeatedly re-worked in contemporary fiction and is the basis of Jill Dawson's novel *Wild Boy* (2003) which will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

Working at the Deaf-Mutes Institute in Paris, shortly after the French Revolution, Dr Itard undertook the civilising of Victor after he was discovered at the age of around twelve running wild in woods near Aveyron in 1798. Victor appeared to have lived alone in the woods without any animal succour for many years, until he began approaching nearby villages, representing an extreme case of an isolated wild child.

Itard's account begins with hope and enthusiasm for the task of socialising the child and thus proving the tenets of perfectibility and the goodness of human nature, but after seven years of effort he suffered disillusionment, despite some success. Financial support for his work with Victor was eventually withdrawn, at which point Itard moved on to other research, leaving the boy to the residual care of Madame Guerin, a housekeeper at the Institute. In actual fact, Itard's account chronicles his success in teaching Victor a number of skills, including the recognition of signs and some social skills, but his disillusionment seemed to stem from his inability to mould Victor into a model citizen, as the boy remained unable to speak or to perform more than the most basic tasks. Although he survived unassisted in the wild for many years, it became clear to Itard that he could never survive alone in society without constant care and supervision. Towards the end, he described his work as, 'less a story of the pupil's progress than of the teacher's failure' (Itard, 1972:141), thus indicating the depth of his own belief in the child's potential if only he as teacher could have found the key. Itard's work is significant in its emphasis on

the importance of language and learned social skills to the creation of the civilised subject. This may explain its popularity as a basis for modern literary fictions.

Truffaut's film *Wild Child (L'Enfant Sauvage)* (1969) is for the most part a straightforward re-working of Itard's account. It is curious, however, that the film terminates at the high point of Itard's most successful period with Victor, thus ignoring the terrible disillusionment that followed and Itard's eventual abandonment of Victor. This leads the film to represent a celebration of the powers of education and the implied perfectibility of human nature in a Rousseauesque return to the concerns of the eighteenth century, where wildness is portrayed as an external circumstance, eminently correctable.

Jill Dawson's twenty-first century text *Wild Boy* (2003), although also based on Itard's account, is much more concerned with the nature of wildness, with the possibility that wildness may be something interior, inherent in our own natures. Dawson contrasts the rational, scientific zeal of Itard with the emotional nature of his housekeeper, Madame Guerin and the innocent but amoral character of Victor. This novel is particularly interesting, for its concern with hidden aspects of the personality only becomes explicit in twentieth-century fiction following the development of psychoanalysis in the work of Sigmund Freud. Although to some extent it seems to replicate earlier Christian concerns about animality, it may be distinguished by its specific reference to wildness as an integral part of the personality rather than as a lapse into the world of external wildness. This new fear of an inherent capacity for wildness is depicted in Dawson's image of the feral boy alongside the celebration of innocence we find in eighteenth century texts. Dawson uses the acquisition of language and reason here, not just in Itard's terms of perfectibility, but as a major determinant of personality formation and she does so in a

way that foregrounds criticism of the resulting speaking subject, rather than the political acts of social groups. A deeper analysis of this text will be undertaken in Chapter Three.

The relationship of man to language is also discussed in the earlier play *Kaspar*, first published in 1967. Again this text is based on factual accounts of the discovery of Kaspar Hauser, but Handke completely dismantles the figure of Kaspar in order to focus attention solely on language and its coercive properties in forming the personality, creating scenarios of reality, social mores and propaganda that largely shape social and individual behaviour. Here language is responsible for the distortion of human being and for most of the perceived ills of society; in fact Handke asserts that an alternative title for the play could be *Speech Torture* (1997 ed.:53). Handke uses simultaneity of voices to effectively portray the reactionary formation of the speaking subject. Kaspar's speech fluency develops alongside the voices of prompters representing the pre-existing world of language to which he is introduced, the directed actions on the stage, and the random, often non-linguistic but sometimes meaningful sounds made by the other Kaspar characters, which may be interpreted as the repressed parts of the personality. On the printed page this process is preserved by presenting the various voices and stage directions at times in side by side columnar form, a stylistic device which I at times incorporate into my own writing practice, although without consciously emulating Handke's form.

Kaspar begins as a shambling clown figure as his name suggests, barely able to relate to or manipulate his environment, but the imposition of language enables him to gradually make an ordered way in the exterior world. 'You are the lucky owner of a sentence [...] which will exorcise every disorder from you' (ibid:63). Kaspar acquires skills and understanding but these acquisitions come at a terrible price. 'Something has become

impossible, something else has become possible' and Kaspar feels the loss. 'I have been sentenced to reality' (ibid:68).

This suggestion of loss in the formation of the speaking subject is an interesting one which will be examined in subsequent chapters. Loss is thus linked to language and wholeness to the non-linguistic or pre-linguistic being personified by the feral child. From this perspective the rational experience of our daily existence can only ever be a partial reality. Thus Handke's text makes us aware of the parts of existence that have been suppressed in the interests of learning to be a social being, and this creates a radical questioning of our assumptions about order, motivation and certainty:

*To some extent simultaneously
with Kaspar's speaking, the audience
hears grumbling, croaking, lamenting
falsetto singing, owl-like hooting coming
from behind him.*

Everyone must work

on himself

Everyone must shirk

from quarrelling with others

everyone must also care for the

other

everyone must think of the

future

everyone must feel completely

secure.

*The audience hears rustling, leaves
slapping against each other, ululations,
roaring, laughter, humming, purring,
warbling, and a single, sharp scream*
(Handke, 1997: 127-8). (Italics sic).

Karen Russell's story 'St Lucy's Home For Girls Raised By Wolves' (Russell, 2007) also shows a concern with interiority. In this case, wildness is so deeply rooted in the human psyche that it is impossible to remove, and is relegated to burial in the depths of the personality under the civilised veneer of language and social custom. A group of wild wolf girls are rehabilitated by nuns with considerable difficulty. Claudette, the narrator is quoted here, trying desperately to learn to be human:

Those were the nights when we dreamed of rivers and meat. The full moon nights were the worst! Worse than cold toilet seats and boiled tomatoes, worse than trying to will our tongues to curl around our new false names [...] I remember how disorienting it was to look down and see two square toed shoes instead of my own four feet. Keep your mouth shut, I repeated during our walking drills, staring straight ahead. Keep your shoes on your feet. Mouth shut, shoes on feet. Do not chew on your new penny loafers. Do not. I stumbled around in a daze, my mouth black with shoe polish
(Russell, 2007:229).

The wolf girls forego their natural desires in order to become civilised members of the community but they lose their communal integrity. For Mirabella who is unable to adapt

and retains wildness, resisting all attempts to civilise her, there is no future. Her sisters must choose to be self-conscious and self-seeking, eventually feeling happy when she runs away and relieves them of the need to support her. The story ends when Claudette, having successfully completed her training in being human, realises she now has the ability to tell untruths.

A gentler image of wildness is depicted in David Malouf's 1978 novel, *An Imaginary Life*. A fictional account of Ovid's exile, fused with images of a feral child drawn from accounts of Victor of Aveyron,⁶ this novel focuses on the relationship between language and non-linguistic being. The capture of the wild boy invokes in Ovid memories of a wild child he communed with in his youth, a child who was lost to him as he entered adulthood and the constraints of Roman culture. Ovid's exile, indeed his whole life, gains meaning as his relationship with this wild boy develops and their journey together ends in a reversal of roles. Whereas Ovid begins with ideals of teaching the boy to become human, he ends with the recognition that the boy is his teacher and protector. In this way he achieves wholeness and an acceptance of himself as being one with his environment:

Did I really discover him out there in the pinewoods, or did he somehow discover me, or rediscover me, out of my own alienation from the world of men? [...] And where is he leading me, since I know at last that he is the leader, he now who is inducting me into the mysteries of a world I have never for a moment understood. Wandering along together, wading through the high grasses side by side, is a kind of conversation that

⁶ Malouf states in his Notes on Sources (1990 ed.:153-4) that his 'Child' is modelled on Dr.J.G.Itard's study of Victor of Aveyron but that the setting in a remote time and place was actively chosen to escape the eighteenth-century concerns with innate character and learned experience which he feels dominate Itard's account.

needs no tongue, a perfect interchange of perceptions, moods, questions, answers, that is as simple as the weather, is in fact the merest shifting of cloud shadows over a landscape or over the surface of a pool, as thoughts melt out of one mind into another, cloud and shadow, with none of the structures of formal speech. It is like talking to oneself (1990 ed.:145).

The entire text is permeated by the sense of loss and longing for this child, ending with a healing as Ovid overcomes his personal exile from himself and as noted above, this is a recurrent image in fiction about feral children, linking loss to the formation of the speaking subject, and one which merits examination in greater depth in the following chapters.

To summarise this chapter: an examination of the way images of feral children have been used in fiction reveals an attraction to the ambiguous border between human and animal nature. In early times animality was seen as power and its harnessing to human qualities welded the human into a successful and powerful being. This celebration of animal qualities declined with the advent of Christianity and the concept of the human being made in God's image with a fixed nature. Feral children in this period were depicted as humans who had fallen from God's grace, giving way to an exterior animality.

In eighteenth-century Europe, fictions began to appear which used the image of the feral child as a vehicle to present defamiliarised views of contemporary civilization as a means of mounting critical attacks on the established practices of both church and state and often suggested radical alternatives. Such clusters of fiction coincided with the period

of rapid social and technological change that accompanied the Enlightenment, the age of reason and the developing industrial revolution.

A similar explosion of texts about feral children from the late twentieth century on, also a period of rapid transformation of material and social conditions, makes comparison of critical texts from the two periods valuable. While eighteenth century fictions were concerned with demanding social change, with presenting the feral child as the embodiment of uncorrupted human nature, which could only be tainted by the evils of a decadent society, from the mid- twentieth century on we see a preoccupation with interiority. The problem of human happiness is no longer soluble by changing social systems from the outside but suspicions develop that 'civilisation's discontents' (Freud, 1930) are rooted within our very psyches in the way we learn to use language and to communicate with others by developing social skills, and in the foregrounding of language and rational thought and the suppression of non-linguistic aspects of being. Culture and language thus oppose wildness and wordlessness. The modern image of the feral child with its fragmented speech and non-communicativeness offers a way to explore the relation of human beings to their cultures and to their inner experiences.

Chapter Two

Perspectives On Wildness And Wordlessness

This chapter aims to explore further the image of the wordless feral child and its relation to the inner wildness identified in the previous chapter. Contrasting the image with that of the speaking subject will foreground the role and function of language in the production of personality and social organisation. While including the work of other relevant theorists, the discussion will centre on Julia Kristeva's concept of the semiotic chora as a pre-linguistic area mediating between drive and the outside world, and the way this concept may be related to the image of the feral child. I will examine Kristeva's specific definition of the literary text as one which allows itself to be permeated with the pre-linguistic rhythms of the chora and her claim that such texts carry revolutionary potential. Finally I will attempt to define the kind of writing that might produce such a text and discuss the value of the feral child as an image to liberate such writing.

Defining Inner Wildness

We have already seen in the previous chapter that the wildness of the feral child has been used in different ways throughout history to make specific cultural comments. The exhortations of medieval Christianity to control and suppress animal passions contrast

with the Enlightenment view of the feral child as an embodiment of uncorrupted innocence. Both these views represent partial views of wildness. It is only with late twentieth-century texts that the recognition of wildness as a dual image becomes explicit. This new representation of the feral child incorporates both the fearful capacity for violence of the uncontrolled, amoral personality and the innocent joy of freedom from arbitrary social restrictions. Thus Russell's wolf girls 'spray exuberant yellow streams' over their new quarters and dream of killing fatty elk (Russell, 2007:225). The captured wolf man in Alice Hoffman's novel *Second Nature* dreams in his hospital bed:

His brothers were calling to him, but he had lost the power to answer. He wanted to run with them, to sleep beside them and dream the same dreams: mice and owls, blood and bones, acres of tall, sweet grass. He threw his head back and opened his mouth, but nothing came out (Hoffman, 1994: 40).

The focus of late twentieth and twenty-first century fiction about feral children is on the explicit recognition that the human psyche contains instinctual desires that conflict with civilisation, and leads to exploration of the problems this poses for the individual in society. This is not a celebration of romanticism or the pastoral but rather a recognition of the need to negotiate a path between civilisation and nature. As we shall see in the analysis of Dawson's *Wild Boy* in the next chapter, it is the civilised characters of Itard and Guérin who struggle with their inner natures, rather than the feral Victor, who conversely has to struggle with learning to live in society. Clearly this shift in focus owes much to Freud's work on motivation and subsequent developments in psychoanalysis.

Freud argued that the basic needs of life are governed by instinctual drives which continually move towards satisfaction and consequently inertia. The frustration of these needs caused by conflicts with the outside environment leads to an awareness of objects (others) and a simultaneous awareness of self as distinct from everything else, and to the blocking of drives by these conflicts with the outside (social) world, so that drives must either be repressed or expressed in other ways. Partial satisfaction is obtained by the displacement of drive energy into other socially acceptable activities. The necessity of repression in order to enter social life, for Freud, creates a lost part of the whole being which can never be directly accessed because it is excluded from conscious life. This part belongs to the whole being as it exists before the advent of self-consciousness which Freud places at the posited Oedipal period around the age of five (Freud, 1993). Parallels may already be seen between the lost, repressed part of being and the silent, asocial, amoral feral child, forced to fit into the constraints of civilisation. It is arguably the focus on language and the symbolic in this process of repression and sublimation, however, which gives the image its specific power.

Freud acknowledged the importance of language and the symbolic in suppressing the unconscious in his attention to dream symbols and speech irregularities as a means of interpreting patients' unwitting attempts to express these blocked drives (*ibid*). He also recognised the functions of art and literature in expressing blocked infantile drives, notably in his essay on the uncanny in which he discusses how writers explore frightening yet strangely familiar fearful figures. For Freud, such figures represent repressed wishes and the act of fictional creation allows both writer and reader to negotiate the emotions attached to unconscious desires:

We have clearly not exhausted the possibilities of poetic licence and the privileges enjoyed by story writers in evoking or in excluding an uncanny feeling [...] The story teller has a *peculiarly* directive power over us; by means of the moods he can put us in to, he is able to guide the current of our emotions, to dam it up in one direction and make it flow in another (Freud, 1955: 251).

However, it is the subsequent re-working of psychoanalytic theory by theorists such as Lacan and Kristeva to incorporate linguistics and a specific concern with the importance of the role of language and the symbolic in forming the personality, that permits a closer analysis of art and literature, and focuses the attention on the relationship of wildness to wordlessness in the text.

Wildness and wordlessness

Lacan posits a moment in the development of human personality, conceptualised as the mirror stage, when the being becomes aware of itself as distinct from the other, and he clearly identifies the use of signs and symbols, the ability to use language as the turning point in becoming a social being. The being gains the ability to manoeuvre in the social world but it is at the cost of suppressing an integral part, the original undifferentiated self-seeking instincts, which must be repressed to obtain the benefits of negotiating with the social order. The entry into the symbolic order then is accompanied by loss as the repressed pre-linguistic being is cut off from the consciousness of the speaking subject. The individual senses the loss but experiences it as a vague lack of wholeness, a longing that can never be successfully assuaged because it can never be consciously explored.

Lacan argues that this continual search for the lost part is a permanent condition of human society:

What am “I”?

‘I’ am in the place from which a voice is heard clamouring, ‘the universe is a defect in the purity of Non-Being.’

And not without reason, for by protecting itself this place makes Being itself languish. This place is called *Jouissance*, and it is the absence of this that makes the universe vain (Lacan, 1977:317).

These are valuable insights into the continued fascination with the image of the feral child as the sensed but unexplained emblem of this lost part of ourselves, leading to a consideration of how language shapes our personalities. Like Freud, Lacan also identifies art and literature as an arena for the expression of repressed drive. However there is a certain rigidity to his conception of a mirror stage with its sudden projection of the being into the symbolic and social, which while allowing for a critical function of the image of the feral child in the text, such as we saw in eighteenth-century fictions, does not allow us to invest the image with any real political power. It allows us to make explicit the loss of the ‘real’ but not to fully exploit the fluidity of the boundaries between subject and object.

The semiotic chora posited by Julia Kristeva, however, provides an useful concept with which to explore the image of the feral child as the meeting place of conflicts between body and culture, consciousness and the unconscious. The concept of chora offers a motility and flexibility that reflects the ambiguous nature of the feral child, and

Kristeva's claim for the revolutionary potential of the literary text gives meaning and motive to the construction of a poetics. The relation of wildness to wordlessness found in the image of the feral child, using Kristeva's perspectives on language as the foundation of social structures, enables the articulation of a writing practice that not only permits the expression of *jouissance* in both writer and reader, but by doing this, by addressing the unspeakable, attempting to say the unsayable, exposes and attacks the very basis of hegemony and repression. At the same time Kristeva's emphasis on the crucial importance of language acquisition, successful separation from the maternal body and the consequent development of a strong sense of self to balance the loss of wholeness and create a confident speaking subject, suggests possibilities for a writing practice that proceeds by negotiation and transformation rather than direct confrontation or its opposite, escape into romantic nostalgia for a presumed pre-linguistic paradise.

Subversion, the semiotic and the savage

Kristeva places the subject/object split much earlier than either Freud or Lacan, in fact arguing that instinctual blocking begins from birth in the early relationship with the mother's body where frustrations are inevitable on a daily basis (Kristeva, 1982). This suggestion indicates a gradually developing sense of separation between self and other, a process that is tenuous; breaking and reforming threads of experience, involving countless small occurrences and repetitions, before sensations coalesce into associations, signs, the beginnings of recognition. This is more process than place and Kristeva names it *chora*, a psychic area where drives hold sway, a pre-linguistic space that is somewhere between unconscious and the symbolic realm of consciousness:

We borrow the term *chora* from Plato's *Timaeus* to denote an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases. We differentiate this uncertain and indeterminate *articulation* from a *disposition* that already depends on representation, lends itself to phenomenological, spatial intuition, and gives rise to a geometry. Although our theoretical description of the *chora* is itself part of the discourse of representation that offers it as evidence, the *chora*, as rupture and articulations (rhythm) precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality and temporality. Our discourse - all discourse - moves with and against the *chora* in the sense that it simultaneously depends upon and refuses it. Although the *chora* can be designated and regulated, it can never be definitively posited: as a result, one can situate the *chora* and if necessary, lend it a topology, but one can never give it axiomatic form (Kristeva, 1984: 25-26).

Immediately it is clear that this space is mobile, continually forming and re-forming and thus is always capable of inducing change. With the recognition of symbols however, once the subject begins to constitute itself in language and becomes a fully social being, the *chora* itself must be repressed, involving, '...the murder of soma, the transformation of the body, the capitulation of drives' (ibid:75).

Language then becomes equated with suppression and the hegemony of established social practices while wordlessness is associated with the pre-linguistic being, the mobile *chora*, inaccessible through language and therefore inaccessible to the speaking subject which can interpret itself only through language. Wordlessness then becomes the focus of interest in the contemporary image of the feral child. It is an image of resistance to the social hegemony, but as we shall see below, Kristeva goes further than this, arguing that

the expression of the semiotic in the literary text actually promotes radical change in the personal and subsequently in the political arena. If all meaning must be understood through consciousness, thought and language, then wordlessness means in comparison to language, but does not mean of itself, a factor reflected in the amorality of the feral child:

The representation of the “character” who becomes the place of this process is one that normative consciousness finds intolerable. For this “character’s” polymorphism is one that knows every perversion and adheres to none, one that moves through every vice without taking up any of them. Un-identical and in-authentic, his is the wisdom of artifice which has no interiority and is constant rejection. He is familiar with the social organism and its paranoid reality but makes light of it and, for them, he is an unbearable monstrosity (ibid:156).

From this perspective the image of the feral child can now be made to ring with a deeper resonance than a simplistic critique of the contemporary social system.

The Feral Child as Catalyst

For Kristeva, as for Freud, drive must be expressed somehow and repressed drive is channelled by consciousness into socially acceptable forms that the ego censor allows. From its inception, psychoanalysis has recognised art and literature as major forms of sublimation, and both Lacan and Kristeva emphasise the use of metaphor and metonymy as markers of stases in the drive economy (Kristeva 1984, Lacan 1977). However, Kristeva goes beyond this to claim that the literary text, by allowing expression of the

semiotic chora, incorporates revolutionary potential, but if the literary text enables the expression of the semiotic, of drive, there is an argument that it encourages social equilibrium, permitting a safe negotiation of the dangerous waters of the unconscious in artistic discharges of tension which might otherwise accumulate to explosion point. For Kristeva, 'The ramification of capitalist society makes it almost impossible for the signifying process to attack material and social obstacles, objective constraints, oppressive entities, and institutions directly' (ibid:105). From this perspective there is little point in producing texts which voice direct protests but Kristeva argues that at the same time as capitalism defuses and contains forms of official protest

the development of imperialism's forces of production brings about a relative relaxation of the relations of production and reproduction and helps process break through into the most stable cogs of significance, its untouchable mainsprings: linguistic structures (ibid:105.)

Thus the globalisation and multiculturalism with which capitalism sustains itself may be argued to contain the seeds of development of a new human being, to produce, 'a different kind of subject, one capable of bringing about new social relations, and thus joining in the process of capitalism's subversion'(ibid:105). It is significant how closely Kristeva's definition of this new man mirrors the utopian image of the regenerated man so prevalent in eighteenth century Europe⁷: 'Imperialism produces its true gravedigger in the non-subjected man, the man-process who sets ablaze and transforms all laws, including -

⁷ For a discussion of the discourse of perfectibility and the revolutionary image of the regenerated man in the eighteenth century, see Julia Douthwaite, (2002) *The Wild Girl, Natural Man and the Monster*, Chapter Five, 'Perfectibility in the Revolutionary Era: Utopian Politics and Dystopian Fiction', pp. 161-204.

and perhaps especially - those of signifying structures' (ibid:105). Although Kristeva appears to develop her argument from the viewpoint that it is material conditions which are seminal in creating the conditions for this new being, she is clear that literary texts are essential in bringing the subject in process into consciousness:

Since, as Marx notes, it lies outside the sphere of material production per se, the signifying process, as it is practiced (sic) by texts - those 'truly free works' - transforms the opaque and impenetrable subject of social relations and struggles into a subject in process/on trial (ibid:105).

Thus, rather than abetting the status quo by releasing tensions into the text, bringing the semiotic chora into the text creates an awareness of the lost part of being and a consciousness of the shortcomings of contemporary society that are not entirely due to external, material conditions, but at least in part to the way our personalities are constrained in its interests. Although it can hardly be said to be true that texts are or ever were, 'truly free works,' the potential for the text to contain hidden, subversive, emotive material which can elude censorship at a personal and political level, adds an exciting dimension to a personal poetics.

The image of the feral child in this kind of fiction then, far from being defeated as something pathetic, or standing purely as a symbol of opposition to existing social systems, represents a kind of catalyst, enabling the split subject to become a more successful whole and the wholeness of this being affects the capacity of individuals to challenge existing social structures and promote life affirming change. In John Fuller's novel *Flawed Angel* (Fuller, 2005) the crown prince Blom, although well meaning, is

ineffective as potential ruler of the mythical country of Samira. Even the addition of a practical wife, Ahraz, will not guarantee success. It is only when, at the end of the novel, he is re-united with his feral brother l'Isilik, that the three young people together form a powerful triangle that will revolutionise their backward realm. Although there are echoes in this novel of the early myths discussed in the last chapter, the focus on the chaotic mix of poetry and prose which characterises the speech of the feral boy in the final pages, clearly refers to the value of the semiotic. The fact that the boy is helpless until joined with the other two, emphasises this wholeness of the psyche to which Kristeva refers, foregrounds the issue that any expression of the semiotic has to be somehow mediated through language. This bringing of the semiotic out into language thus demands that the feral child be brought out and displayed, rather than being the 'wild man within,' (Dudley & Novak, 1972), or the confrontational noble savage of earlier fiction. This feral child is not a model or an example but a subversive figure in its own right comparable with Kristeva's 'non- subject.'

Defining the subversive literary text

What specific literary devices may be employed in the effort to permit the semiotic chora to enter the text? We have already noted the impossibility of directly accessing the chora through language which is the implement of its repression. The technique of defamiliarisation was exposed in the previous chapter as a major means of contrasting the innocent feral child with the image of a corrupt and decadent society. Psychoanalysis adds to this repertoire with its recognition of slippages in language as the way into the unconscious experiences of the subject. Linguistic association is a well used psychoanalytical tool; fragmented and fractured speech patterns reflect dissociations,

fragmented personalities, the attachment of blocked desire to metaphor and metonymy in the processes of displacement and condensation. Repressed desire breaks through the language hegemony in linguistic ruptures, word slips, unexpected associations, puns and ambiguities.

Although in the clinical setting, such utterances are unwanted by the patients who find themselves making them, are, in fact, failures of the ego censor to sublimate blocked drive and maintain socially acceptable behaviour, Kristeva argues that we can deliberately manipulate language in similar ways to allow the semiotic to escape into the text;

Art, this semiotization of the symbolic - thus represents the flow of jouissance into language [...] art specifies the means - the only means - that jouissance harbors (sic) for infiltrating that order. In cracking the socio-symbolic order, splitting it open, changing vocabulary, syntax, the word itself, and releasing from beneath them the drives borne by vocalic or kinetic differences, jouissance works its way into the social and symbolic (Kristeva, 1984:79-80).

In written works she distinguishes between genotext and phenotext. Phenotext carries the everyday structures of language and communication while genotext contains the unspeakable rhythms of the drive impulses that comprise the chora. The way that genotext is hidden within or under the phenotext, eludes the ego censor and gives expression and relief to the tensions of the organism without fracturing the economy of the subject (Kristeva, 1984). Negotiation of the chora is, however, a perilous affair. In traditional psychoanalysis, successful sublimation steers a path between phantasy

(psychosis) and guilt (neurosis). Care will be needed in the construction of a poetics that achieves a similar balance. The object of such a writing practice is not to enter into the chaos of the chora, but to allow it to permeate the subjective boundaries, thus enabling a more flexible subject. As in Fuller's novel, the rational mind and the unconscious are essential to each other if a functioning whole is to be formed, it is the state of balance between the two which is the factor for change.

The production of art with its emphasis on genotext, however, is identified as an exposition of the subject in society:

Art reveals a specific *practice*, crystallized (sic) in a mode of production with highly diversified and multiplied manifestations. It weaves into language (or other 'signifying materials') the complex relations of a subject caught between 'nature' and 'culture', between the immemorial ideological and scientific *tradition*, henceforth available, and the *present*, between *desire* and the *law*, the body, language and metalanguage' (Kristeva 1988:97).

Kristeva draws on Barthes' definition of writing as an inclusion which tests the limits of subjectivity to foreground the way such writing draws attention to the fact that the subject is continually 'in process/on trial' (ibid:97). She relates the production of texts which foreground the genotext to periods of rapid and revolutionary change, like the periods chosen for comparison in this particular study.

It has only been in very recent years or in revolutionary periods that signifying practice has inscribed within the phenotext the plural, heterogeneous, and contradictory processes of signification encompassing the flow of drives, material discontinuity, political struggle, and the pulverization of language (Kristeva, 1984:88).

So far we have identified the techniques of defamiliarisation and fragmented syntax to provide the ambiguity which allows the semiotic into the text. Kristeva also foregrounds the practice of 'intertextuality', the transposition of several different sign systems within a text (ibid). In this way the reader is presented with a variety of discourses necessitating shifts in viewpoint as the consciousness passes from one to another, thus exposing a world of plurality rather than a single world view. The term owes much to the work of M.M. Bakhtin on heteroglossia and polyphony, and Kristeva was one of the first literary theorists to be influenced by his work and to bring it to the attention of the Western world. For Bakhtin, 'Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear' (Bakhtin 1981:272). Thus conflicting voices open up, 'the contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language' (ibid).

In addition, Bakhtin identifies a particular subversive discourse, which he names 'carnival' which has existed throughout the history of language as an alternative to the official discourse of the period. Carnival is defined as the language of the common people, a resistance to the hegemony of rulers, a mocking discourse, full of physicality, contrasting the rudeness of the body with the manners of civilisation. For Bakhtin, all discourse, all language is a dialogue, each utterance pre-supposing a response, a process

which he names 'dialogic' (Bakhtin, 1981). Therefore, it is not the language per se that is the harbinger of change but the conflicts contained within it, between the many different voices buried in the text. It is this notion of the dialogic which Kristeva incorporates into her definitions of the literary text, foregrounding the inclusion of the genotext within the phenotext and celebrating intertextuality.

This technique of polyphony is linked to the process of defamiliarisation, where in fiction about feral children, the perspectives of the various characters conflict with the asocial or absent viewpoint of the feral child. The contemporary fictions we have examined all contain polyphonic devices which expose these conflicts. The fact that the viewpoints contrasted with that of the feral child are of those 'in charge' - the guardians, captors, rehabilitators - is significant for the symbolic image of the feral child as metaphor for marginalised groups standing in opposition to the official powers of society as well as standing for the relation between the conscious and the unconscious.

Polyphony is employed in various ways in contemporary fiction. Some authors present the various characters in separate first-person narratives, eg Dawson's *Wild Boy* (2003), Jane Rogers's *Mr Wroe's Virgins* (Rogers, 1991), while others use a single narrator, but foreground the discourses of the other characters by contrasting the various viewpoints through the narrator's reflections and through reported speech, as in Karen Russell's 'St Lucy's Home For Girls Raised By Wolves' (2007).

Some fiction about feral children uses the fragmented language of the feral child to give a specific voice to the child which draws attention to its semiotic potential. Fuller's feral child l'Isilik, when first introduced makes only inarticulate sounds, learns language from his benefactor, forgets it again in captivity, and finally emerges speaking in a poetry constructed from overheard fragments of other characters' conversations:

The face with no name [...] was himself all the same. The Akond will pay, since his first-born lives, and once in the palace, who knows what he'll say? Go back to the wood where your palaces stood: they stand there still. They stand there still (Fuller, 2005: 236).

Amara, in *Knowledge Of Angels* also graduates from silence to fractured syntax. The feral girl, Martha, in *Mr Wroe's Virgins* begins with fragmented speech but even initially has a large vocabulary and a basic grasp of sentence construction which rapidly extends to a reasonably competent form of language that somewhat detracts from the position of the feral child as the expression of the semiotic.

The use of fractured and fragmented speech, while approaching the 'pulverisation of language' posited by Kristeva (1984:88) as an opening up of the semiotic, poses stylistic problems for fiction. It is difficult to sustain in a fiction of any length, therefore best presented perhaps as a glimpse of chaos, rather than a full length plunge into it. Its value lies in intermittency and absence, reflecting the elusive nature of the chora and the way it is wound around and beneath linguistic structure and consequently the speaking subject itself.

This may be the reason why some authors keep their feral child silent, notably Dawson's Victor, whose character is defined by the other voices in the text and whose experience can only be related through their reflections and those of the author who attempts to present Victor's viewpoint through sections of free indirect speech. Dawson's construction of the feral child is particularly interesting in the way Victor dominates the

text while being essentially absent from it. For this reason I have chosen this text for further analysis before discussing in detail the development of my own poetics.

This chapter began by drawing on historical perspectives of feral children in fiction discussed earlier to reveal a contemporary preoccupation with inner wildness related to wordlessness. Discussing this relation through the perspective of psychoanalytic theory identified language as the main concern of contemporary literature about feral children, in an attempt to contact or express the non-linguistic part of being that is repressed by the constitution of the speaking subject. Julia Kristeva's theories of the semiotic chora and the revolutionary potential of literary texts which permit the expression of repressed drives were acknowledged as significant in developing a poetics which poses radical questions about human civilisation, using the non linguistic image of the feral child. Stylistic techniques of defamiliarisation, fragmented syntax, intertextuality, polyphony and heteroglossia were examined in respect to existing fiction about feral children, and the text of Jill Dawson's *Wild Boy* was selected for closer analysis in the next chapter.

Chapter Three

Semiotic Presence in Jill Dawson's *Wild Boy*

Drawing on the concept of the feral child as a catalyst, this chapter will examine *Wild Boy* for signs of the presence of the semiotic genotext and will endeavour to ascertain how this presence is achieved. Discussion of Dawson's use of formal devices, literary techniques and poetic language permit a tentative exploration of the poetics of both text and writer which will illuminate the tracing of a personal poetics in Chapter Four.

Setting the conditions of chora

The novel *Wild Boy* relates the attempted civilisation of Victor, a child discovered running wild in the woods of Aveyron, France, in 1798, shortly after the French revolution. Dawson takes the formal records, written in 1799 and 1806, left by Dr Jean Marc Gaspard Itard of his work with Victor at the Deaf-Mutes Institute at Paris as the basis of the novel but, by adding fictional events and characters, she is able to create a fuller, although fictive, version of their relationship. By introducing the first-person narrative of Madame Guerin, Victor's governess at the Deaf Institute, as an equal discourse in conflict with Itard's voice, as well as attempting to portray Victor's wordless experiences through an authorial representation of him in free indirect speech, she is able

to manipulate the phenotext to foreground conflict and fluctuation, the conditions of the semiotic chora.

The choice of setting is fortuitous. As we have seen, the eighteenth century was a period of political and social instability throughout Europe. Enlightenment thinking increasingly advocated reliance on human intellectual powers of reasoning as the key to effective government and scientific progress, rather than mysticism and divine revelation of knowledge as in earlier times. This emphasis on reason required the re-definition, explanation and classification of phenomena in all fields. Arguments about human nature and the values of civilisation and education found a focus in the cases of newly discovered feral children which stimulated considerable debate. Itard recorded the furore of public interest created by the arrival in Paris of Victor in 1798. The citizens seized on Victor as the image of innocent nature, soon to achieve education and civilised status, and were sadly disappointed to observe ‘a disgusting, slovenly boy [...] indifferent to everybody and paying no regard to any thing’ (Itard, 1972 ed.:96). The date of Victor’s arrival places the ambiguous figure of the feral child in the centre of the rapid transition of culture taking place in post-revolutionary Paris, a setting characterised by flux and conflict. While such a setting is not essential to the production of the genotext as described by Kristeva, it creates an underlying rhythm of motility and uncertainty that resonates with the fluid conditions of the chora.

Additionally, the contrast between the city and the countryside, which weaves through the novel, foregrounds a different view of wildness. As the traditional threat of exterior wildness with forests full of dangerous creatures receded from increasing urban development, it is arguable that a new kind of wildness attracted concern, the interior wildness of civilisation. In an inversion of earlier times, the city becomes the place of

unknown dangers, while the forest takes on a pastoral innocence, a motif which Dawson uses to great advantage in her depiction of Victor. Urban violence must have been a very real concern following the atrocities committed in Paris in the name of revolutionary zeal, and this concern with wildness and unpredictability within civilised communities enables Dawson to exploit fears of wildness in the text in a way that is relevant to our own contemporary anxieties as we negotiate problems of lawlessness in our inner cities, as well as the global atrocities that are still perpetrated in the name of civilisation.

Wild Boy is saturated with the characters' unease as to the bloodthirsty acts (in some cases committed by themselves) of the revolution. Madame Guerin is haunted by memories of carrying the head of the Princesse de Lamballe on a pike, images of which, when banished from conscious thought, return in her dreams (Dawson, 2003:222).

The character of Dr Itard, a staunch believer in the new republic, strays away from thoughts of the violence and uncontrolled passions which created the conditions of its birth. Having grown up in the country at the time of the terrors, he did not experience the full horror and is thus able to gloss over it, instead looking ahead to the promise of the new order. At the very beginning of the text, Dawson relates the fluctuating conditions at the dawn of the republic, the image of *l'homme régénéré*⁸ to the figure of the wild boy, newly arrived in Paris. At first sight of Victor, Itard declares, 'His (Victor's) story belongs to another time, to other people, to another country. His emergence from that place mirrors the task of the Republic itself: to shake off its ignorant, violent past and now emerge fully into the light' (ibid:10).

⁸ The term refers to the engraving, *L'Homme Régénéré* by Jacques Louis Perée (1795), now in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and reproduced in Julia Douthwaite's *The Wild Girl, Natural Man and The Monster* (2002:174).

Into these fluctuating conditions, Dawson drops the discourses of the time, the carnivalistic, ribald critiques of the common people; the workman Lemeris's inflammatory magazines; the mockery of the aristocracy taken to bloodthirsty lengths by the pike-carrying mobs. The discourse of revolution, the destruction of established institutions is contained in mocking practices such as the Revolutionary Marriage⁹ but also in the official discourses of the new regime, the levelling of classes signalled by the compulsory address of 'Citoyen'.

In Dawson's text such discourses never attain hegemony. Old institutions are broken down but old beliefs are harder to shift and new social processes are still forming and pushing through. Thus, God is officially banished but for Victor's father, Jacques Colombe, He may still be watching (ibid:140).

The degree to which the text is permeated by vacillations and contradictory viewpoints as the characters re-evaluate themselves, creates special emphasis on the essential fluidity of subjectivity, on its constant process, despite its constraints. The theme of competing realities, not only between characters but within their own psyches, is a feature of postmodern fiction, leading to the suggestion of subjective malleability and therefore the potential for change that was perhaps less explicit in modernist fiction.

The subject in process

Dawson's manipulation of her characters shows their reactions and adjustments to the environment throughout the novel. Thus Madame Guerin's hopes of freedom at the time of the revolution are later viewed as hopeless ignorance of what was to come (ibid:174).

⁹ Dawson describes this as the practice of throwing a man and woman tied together into the Seine in order to observe them attacking each other in a struggle to free themselves until they drowned (Dawson, 2002:81)

Itard's initial optimism regarding his ability to civilise Victor becomes disillusion, 'less a story of a pupil's progress, than an account of a teacher's failure' (ibid:279). Such changes are not limited to progressive developments, however, but also reflect their negotiations of old and new ideas. Although he is a dedicated republican who zealously uses the egalitarian address of 'citoyen' long after the majority have abandoned it, Itard is affronted when his intellectual inferiors, Madame Guerin and her daughter Julie, have the temerity to disagree with his opinions. Yet at other times he envies the practical authority which the governess has over Victor, an authority which he sometimes sees as superior to his own attempts at teaching the boy.

These few examples cannot replicate in this space the way Dawson sets up a constant dialectic in the text between the subject and the environment. Vacillation and contradiction hamper the relationships between the characters and also confuse their own thoughts so that a discourse is constructed beneath the surface content, an undefined aura of conflict and plurality, the genotext.

At the same time as this contradictory discourse is established, Dawson creates an opposing one of interchange. The major characters, Dr Itard, Madame Guerin and Victor are made to intermingle by the use of similar phrases and thought images. This is achieved in two ways. Firstly, the characters make conscious comparisons between themselves. Madame Guerin identifies Victor with her dead baby Joseph, inadvertently calling him by the child's name (ibid:34). Her dream of the wolf girls is directly followed by memories of Joseph and thoughts of Victor, newly delivered into her care (ibid:46). Her husband, Henri, on his death bed, questions why Victor reminds him of Joseph (ibid: 162) and Madame Guerin directly identifies Victor as the catalyst, provoking memories of Joseph: 'It is Victor, I swear it, that musty dark boy as foul and foreign as the rotting

secrets in the deepest part of the woods, it's Victor who keeps bringing back Joseph for me' (ibid:139).

This linking of Victor to Joseph in the symbol of the lost child will be discussed further below. For the moment we note the significance of this fluid interchange of character. Madame Guerin also relates Itard to Victor in this motif of lost child and motherlessness. 'Something about the man, for all his cleverness, for all his stiffness, in fact, because of it - he strikes me more and more as a motherless child, as lost, in his way, as Victor is' (ibid:216).

On another occasion Madame Guerin relates herself to Itard in the way that her social persona is the result of what she has been taught, just as Itard is the product of his education. Itard frequently recognises aspects of himself in Victor, recalling how he hid in trees as a child and exhibited the same refusal to yield to parental controls that Victor demonstrates. 'I have the sensation of my will again; a tremendous stubbornness which I recognise in Victor and which makes me feel, occasionally, a greater closeness and respect for him' (ibid:106). Itard begins from the position of omnipotent teacher, seeing Victor as a 'pure white envelope [...] holding a letter written in invisible ink, in a language that no one else can read. *A language that I alone will come to understand*' (italics sic) (ibid:24). Later, he realises he was treated in the same way by his dreaded uncle and ends by acknowledging himself as Victor's pupil as much as his teacher. Thus Victor is the catalyst for a learning curve which permits Itard to develop a less rigid view of himself and his society.

As well as these direct comparisons, Dawson assigns similarly phrased ideas to Itard and Guerin which lead the reader to perceive how they complement each other despite the fact that their voices are presented in contradiction. Thus the sense of the uncanny felt by

Itard on meeting Victor is mirrored by the attraction and fear experienced by Madame Guerin at her first sight of the boy.

Victor's inability to deal with his sexual feelings is paralleled by Itard's difficulties in his relationship to Julie Guerin. Both characters, faced with the physical presence of an attractive female, literally push her away. Itard is never able to voice his sexual difficulties, but skates ambiguously round the subject, just as Victor, although obsessively indulging in masturbation, is unable to discover how to satisfy his drives.

This interrelation of the main characters blurs the borders between them and heightens the awareness of flux and tenuous connections already present in the setting. However, the very fact of interrelation suggests the forming, fragmentation and reforming of a whole in the same way that the subject is continually in process. The effect of the text is to emphasise the separation of the parts at the same time as it celebrates their coming together. The distinctive aspects of each character prevent them from disappearing into chaos, and permit a meaningful negotiation of reality within the novel.

It is possible to read the characters as representing separate aspects of personality. Itard's conscientious adherence to the values of the new republic and his terrible need to control his passions identify him in the text as a controlling, supervising entity which may be likened to Freud's concept of the superego. His self-imposed role is to control both Victor and Madame Guerin in conducting his experimental work with the wild boy. This role is, however, shot through with contradictions. Itard is perched on a rocky throne where his control is continually challenged by both Victor and Madame Guerin, repeatedly allowing alternative versions of reality into the text.

Madame Guerin, while ostensibly submitting to Itard's instructions, subversively follows her own practical objectives in dealing with Victor. Victor's responses to Itard

veer randomly between co-operation, non-response and violent refusal and include occasional escapes.

Itard's self-regulation is even more rigid than the control he attempts over Victor and the governess. As we have already noted, his sexuality is repressed to the point where he is unable even to give voice to sexual feelings. The reader sees only ambiguity in his relation to Julie Guerin, characterised by vague approaches and immediate rejection at the sign of any advances from her. The siting of this self-control in childhood is significant. Itard is taught by his uncle to substitute thoughts of a bowl of fruit for 'beastly thoughts' (ibid:268). This repressed fear of sexuality interferes with his responsibility to teach Victor social skills governing sexual behaviour and renders him helpless to deal with Victor's masturbation. In response to a colleague's suggestion that he take Victor to a prostitute and show him by example what to do, Itard's response is as follows:

I gave a half-smile, waved my hand dismissively. At all costs, I did not wish my ignorance of such matters to be revealed.

A fine suggestion, Virey, but have you considered the perils? He has no - no care for public decency or decorum. Once revealed to him, the lures of the flesh may forever hail him with an ever-increasing power. He might indulge in the beastly behaviour only worthy of a satyr! What decent woman would be safe? (ibid:267).

The association of Victor with beastliness and the animality of the mythical satyr links to Itard's fears of his own inner wildness. This repressed fear finds expression in fear of other animals such as horses that might become uncontrollable, but he also suffers from

other nameless fears. While discussing Victor with a fatherly colleague, Dr Pinel, Itard has a childhood memory of being separated from his father which is accompanied by an undefined fear that makes him take sudden leave of the great doctor. 'Escaping the solitary figure of Pinel, knowing him to be watching me, but not looking back, I felt eight years old again, with something terrifying hovering in front of me, beating great wings in front of my face' (ibid:53). Similarly, when notified by his uncle of the death of his mother, the young Itard struggles to recall the moral of the fable of the Fox and the Crow, which his uncle has frequently made him recite as a guard against vanity but, 'in my confusion, all I could understand was this: it is unsafe. That is the lesson. It is unsafe - when words press at my tongue, when my heart threatens to leap there, I must keep my mouth closed, or, like the Crow, lose everything' (ibid:245).

This fear of expressing inner passions has physical effects. Itard stutters, blushes, performs obsessive movements in moments of stress where his control falters. Here he recognises himself in Victor. 'It occurred to me [...] that my spasmodic movements, my nervous rocking, my compulsive hand rubbing, all had a quality reminiscent of Victor' (ibid:133). The recognition of such symptoms, the release of repressed memories into the text in the context of Victor's presence or when thinking about Victor, foregrounds Victor and what he represents as the catalyst making Itard a responsive, reflexive figure rather than a rigid symbol of authority. A few examples will suffice. Victor's love of the outdoors stimulates childhood memories for Itard of hiding in the garden from his mother, immediately preceding his being sent away to live with his uncle. The conscious exploration of this memory provides Itard with the realisation that his stutter started from that moment, the moment of separation from his mother (ibid:244).

On another occasion, Itard is suffused with humiliation as a result of Victor, his prize protégé, masturbating in front of an assembly of Itard's learned colleagues (ibid:188-190). This stimulates childhood memories of humiliation at the hands of his father for small misdemeanours. Although he has not recalled the incidents for twenty years, once admitted into his adult consciousness, he is able to explore them in a way which admits of rational explanation and allows him to express the rage he was forced to suppress at the time (ibid:194).

The inconsistencies which Dawson creates in Itard permits alternative readings of his character. At one moment the controlling father, albeit flawed and fragile, at the next he appears as a man of reason and logic, a man who decries emotion and emphasises empiricism. 'I must renew my vigilance at controlling my feelings. They are the enemy of reason, of science, of proper empirical evidence. The enemy of truth itself' (ibid:79).

Itard's world is that of learning, of reasoned argument. He is in the avant garde of his time, adopting a 'contentious position' (ibid:134) in opposition to his colleagues who follow the fashionable tenets of Rousseau with regard to the basic goodness of human nature. He embraces the new republic and shows contempt for old ideas, including the concept of a Supreme Being which is still being posited by his colleague the Abbé Sicard. In his work with Victor, Itard is critical of Rousseau, adapting or ignoring his advice. He refers to Rousseau's *Reveries* as 'an old man's fantasies of persecution' (ibid:19). Itard's position is that human nature is basically amoral, that the higher emotions as he calls them, the moral values, are a creation of civilisation and education, challenging the prevailing view that human nature is basically good, possessed of a natural reason demonstrated by the innocence of the child of nature. Thus for Itard the civilising of Victor through his teaching is crucial to the defence of his strongest beliefs.

However, just as the controlling aspects of Itard's personality are shot through with contradiction, so is the image of the rational scientist. At the same time as he advocates empiricism, Itard embraces the ambiguity of the imagination. In response to Julie Guerin's fear of the unthinkable horror to which Victor has been subjected as a child, Itard replies, 'But imagination is sometimes all we have![...]Nothing is unimaginable. We must never refuse to imagine¹⁰....' (ibid:57). Juxtaposition of this statement with a quickening of the heartbeat is significant. The metaphor of the heart is frequently linked in Itard's thoughts with his ambiguous notion of the 'higher emotions' (ibid:179).

In other situations, Victor enables Itard to express emotions which he never expresses in his normal, rational existence. Following Victor's uncontrolled behaviour at Madame Recamier's dinner party, Itard, once alone with Victor, indulges in vicarious pleasure, giving way to fits of laughter, and is moved to tears by Victor's physical demonstrations of affection (ibid:158). He feels none of the humiliation that is induced by Victor's animalist behaviour in front of his colleagues, mentioned earlier. Contradicting himself, reversing his position, vacillating about his results, Itard presents as a complex, shifting figure, reacting and reforming just as any fictional character might but the significance in this novel is that the experience of his experiences is shaped by the presence of the wild boy Victor.

The character of Madame Guerin may be similarly analysed. If Itard represents the repressing superego, the governess represents the role of the rational ego. Materialistic and practical, she tends to the physical realities of caring for Victor and frequently also

¹⁰ Itard's use of the term 'imagination' here seems closer to the modern sense of 'what if' rather than the eighteenth century concept of the imagination as a crossing point between mind and body capable of producing physical effects. See Dennis Todd's discussion of the imagination in *Imagining Monsters: Miscreations of the Self in Eighteenth Century England* (1995).

for Itard. Her outlook is one of work and motivation. On meeting Victor for the first time her reaction is, 'It made a poor body flinch to think what he had been through, how *bored* - that's what I kept thinking, how bored he must have been, all alone. With no real work to keep him busy' (ibid:12).

Yet here there is also contradiction. Towards the end of the novel, no longer employed within the Institute, she becomes slovenly, her former work and cleanly habits acknowledged as the products of early indoctrination which she has succeeded in casting off while living with Victor.

Her common sense approach is maternal, in contrast to Itard's paternal, forbidding aspect. Like her husband Henri, and the workman Lemer, she relies on the wisdom of experience rather than intellectual concepts, decrying both Itard's principles and those of Rousseau:

What does Melancholy Jacques (Rousseau) know of infants? He abandoned all five of his own to the foundling hospital. No wonder his ideas are wanting in good common sense. I doubt Jean-Jacques Rousseau walked the floors, night after night, with a screaming babe, nor understood half the little tricks that a mother knows to make a child biddable (ibid:120)

and again:

You must eat, I began, meaning to give him (her husband, Henri) a long lecture. I had made a good snail and milk paste - which Julie says is a fine cure no matter what the doctor says and what does he know about tuberculosis, in any case, he has not lived with it for fifteen years as I have (ibid:161).

The hidden contradiction here is that despite Madame Guerin's motherly ministrations, a combination of practical considerations and superstitious beliefs lead her to murder her own child as the reader later discovers. By this device, Dawson avoids a simplistic confrontation between intellectual and emotional thinking.

In Itard's documentary account, only passing reference is made to Madame Guerin's daughter Julia, a child of eleven or twelve. Dawson's reshaping of the daughter into the coquettish young woman Julie sets the scene for exploring Itard's fear of sexuality, but also foregrounds split aspects of woman, the nurturing comforter represented by the governess, and the playful, illogical attributes of the daughter, these attributes perhaps making Julie, who is also an absent voice in the text, closer to Victor than to her practically minded mother.

While Victor is a catalyst enabling access to memories previously lost to Itard, in Madame Guerin, he stirs up memories of which she is conscious but which she endeavours to forget, such as her own participation in violence during the revolution and the murder of her baby son, Joseph. It is only with her revelation of this murder that we understand the depths of her terror at her own inner wildness, her alienation from her inner self. Her love for Victor, previously hinted at, is clearly exposed as a sublimation of her desire for the child she has not only lost, but deliberately destroyed. The fact that she killed the child in order to save the rest of her family does not assuage her guilt. The proliferation of references throughout the text to the lost or dead child with their continual links to repression and the release of information through the presence of the feral child point to the symbolic function of this murder as a representation of Kristeva's 'murder of

soma' (1984:75), the essential repression of the sensual body and the semiotic in the interests of becoming a social being, a speaking subject.

Madame Guerin's dream of the wolf girls (Dawson, 2003:45), shortly after taking over Victor's care, is a reference to the capture of the Indian feral girls, Amala and Kamala¹¹. This did not actually occur until the twentieth century, which focuses the attention on this presaging of events, and points to the continuing debate on the nature of human identity and the contemporary relevance of the image of the feral child.

This dream too is associated with memories of Joseph, in this case as an innocent babe, but in later memories Joseph is depicted as a changeling baby, like Victor, acting in amoral fashion, without love, refusing or responding only to achieve his wants, even running away. These memories are linked to fairy tale motifs such as the tale of the gingerbread boy and at another time, Madame Guerin dreams of chasing after a rabbit-child who calls, 'run run as fast as you can,' a direct reference to the tale of the gingerbread boy linking all these uncanny children together. In yet another dream she sees Felicité Colombe, the young woman who has arrived in Paris claiming Victor as her son, with a fox's tail under her skirt, and watches her turn into a vixen and swim away down river with a small white shape on her back which the dreamer cannot quite make out. The use of these surreal animal/human hybrid images common to fairy tales suggest the ambiguity of human identity. In these images the children are not the ones who are lost; in fact they are running away, escaping. It is the adults who feel the sense of loss, who chase fruitlessly after them and in the image of the small white shape that cannot be quite made out, lies the secret of the unthinkable, the unspeakable, that which cannot be

¹¹ Amala and Kamala were girls aged approximately 8 years and 18 months, dug from a wolf's den in Midnapore, India in 1920 and subsequently taken into the care of Reverend Singh at the local orphanage. See Michael Newton's *Savage Girls and Wild Boys* (2002), Ch. 6, pp. 182-195, for a full account.

put into words, the pre-symbolic chora, cut off from conscious life. Though the image is fraught with fear and the uncanny, as defined by Freud in his essay 'The Uncanny' (1919), unknown yet vaguely familiar, its very desirability, the desire for the lost part, drives the dreamer to endlessly repeat the chase.

Victor himself clearly represents the lost child, present but absent, self-sufficient and amoral. Unable to speak directly in the text his physical existence is described through the voices of Itard and Madame Guerin while Dawson attempts to approach his interior experience through the use of free indirect speech. In this way he becomes a hidden presence, Dawson shapes him into the crucible where revolutionary change is articulated in the self-knowledge of the other characters.

Victor's overt actions display some characteristics of the chora, of the semiotic. Throughout, his behaviour is punctuated by random, apparently pointless activities: running around, knocking things over, making strange noises. He has no sense of propriety, masturbating and farting in public, and little consideration for others, taking food off their plates and demanding his simple wants in non-verbal communication. But here too is contradiction and change. Victor learns to recognise signs, to appreciate simple games. He becomes capable of performing basic domestic chores and expresses happiness in the presence of his governess. It is significant that his single real spoken word, 'lait' represents the most basic nurturing element of childhood, and this is not a fictional device of Dawson's but is a recounting of the facts documented in Itard's record (Itard 1972:121).

Victor, like Joseph, is identified as a changeling at birth by his real mother (Dominique Colombe) (Dawson 2003:69). Like Itard, he is deprived of his parents at the oedipal stage of development, though unlike Itard he has no substitute parent to further

his development. The uncivilised entity which is Victor, a bundle of uncontrolled, random impulses, activities and rages represents for Itard and Madame Guerin all the passions that they fear so much in themselves. He is living proof for Itard of his belief that, ‘if there exists in man a relationship between the needs of the body and the emotions of the heart, then that sympathetic harmony is, like most great and noble passions, the fortunate fruit of man’s education’ (ibid:279). Dawson lifts this quotation directly from the documentary account written by Itard (Itard 1972:178). In this documentary account, Itard comes to recognise Victor’s non-linguistic skills, his heightened senses of smell and hearing; his ability to confidently communicate his wants in non-verbal messages, yet the primary focus of his study is the education of Victor, the attempt to transform him into a successful social being. Dawson, however, expands on Itard’s recognition of Victor’s unreasoned knowledge, creating fictional events such as Victor’s skill at the game of cups, and the way Itard feels himself assessed by Victor at their first meeting, to create a textual emphasis on the idea that there are other aspects of being besides the intellectual, the logical, the linguistic, the ‘truth’. At his first meeting with Victor, Itard tries to record his feelings:

I found that my attempts to capture it in my journal were worthless. Words eluded me. I had the most powerful impression of having been glimpsed, assessed and dismissed. Worse, the sensation was familiar to me; it provoked a memory too peculiar too write down. I shuddered. I had the queer sense that we had met before (ibid:11).

Like the small white shape of Madame Guerin's dream, this wordless sensation is somehow familiar, present yet inaccessible, attractive yet at the same time repellent and peculiar, again reminiscent of Freud's definitions of the uncanny, where repressed drive appears in the consciousness as a fearful yet familiar image or sensation.

Despite both Madame Guerin and Itard expressing disillusion with the Rousseauesque concept of the child of nature, they both see Victor as its embodiment. His love of the outdoors, his empathy with earth, water, light and the things of the forest strike a nostalgic resonance with the city dwellers as both characters spent their childhood years in the country. Here, instead of the child of nature representing some ideal of human innocence, for Itard and Guerin, Victor links the forest, the country to a lost childhood and the nostalgic desire for what once was, the world they lived in before entry into the social world and the world of education and training, the world before separation from parents.

Although Victor occupies a crucial position in the text, he is prevented from dominating the narrative by Dawson's use of polyphonic form. The conflicting discourses come to the fore, recede and change from moment to moment, so that the whole text becomes a tentative articulation, a web of propositions, a negotiation of subjective realities rather than an idealistic progression. In addition to the major voices, minor characters add their viewpoints, albeit mediated through the perceptions of Itard, Guerin and authorial narrative. Complicating the text still further, Dawson uses direct quotes from the real Itard's account of his work interspersed with fictionalised sections and also makes much use of paraphrasing the real events, reminding us that even the account written down by Itard, cannot be considered as 'real,' being a formal account written for his peers and employers and, at any given point, being mediated through his own

subjectivity. Madame Guerin presents the subversive carnivalesque voices of the rioting crowds as well as her everyday down-to-earth discourse, and the voice of Jacques Colombe runs adjacent to the experiences assigned to Victor in the sections of free indirect speech.

This rich heteroglossia creates a multitude of viewpoints, a plural reality in which discourses may dominate temporarily but are challenged and effaced by the clamour of others. No meaning is certain here, every page is hedged with ambiguity, and the fluid rhythm which runs beneath the text parallels the defamiliarised world in which Victor lives, pushed into an unknown environment, much as the human infant must struggle to make sense of the world:

He (Victor) sees only noise. A great white murmur envelops him, a cloud. He can't escape it. Stiff white linen scratches at his throat, his cuffs. Smells assail him, his tongue throbs with the new stinging tastes. She presses him, she screams at him. There are no spots of light to lose himself in, no green, no soft warm mud to cover his eyes. He puts his hands over his eyes and the visitors, the dark hats, peel them away again (ibid:45).

Having established this fluctuating rhythm, Dawson introduces significance by the use of metaphor and metonymy, using repetitive images to draw attention to the release of repressed material in the text. We have already noted the symbolic images of the lost child which permeate the text. We can add to this the metaphor of milk as a life-giving substance, a representation of mothering even. Although taken from the real Victor's constant desire for milk and the fact that the only recognisable word ever spoken by

Victor of Aveyron was 'lait', in Itard's dream of the lake of milk it becomes an obsessive symbol of desire for the mother's body, the breast, especially so as even though it is Victor who is drinking the milk in the dream, the lake is situated in the country of Itard's childhood, not the area from which Victor originated.

The disembodied hand is another image repeated throughout the text. Madame Guerin, a former glove maker, frequently dreams of gloves. Hands are for Victor a means of communication. He seizes the hands of Itard, Guerin and Julie to direct them to attend to his wants, in this way appropriating the hands which appear as acting under Victor's volition, clear symbols of fragmentation of the body, the subject lacking in the co-ordination that allows successful negotiation of the outside world. Another image of fragmentation is the frequent reference to necks. From the cut throats of the French aristocracy to the ribbons Julie wears round her neck to the healed scar traversing Victor's throat, the meaning of the neck is ambiguous, at one point referring to the violence of revolution, at another to the cruelty wreaked on Victor by his parents, yet perhaps subversively referring to the violent splitting of the psyche which must take place for entry into the symbolic order to occur. The significance of the neck as the transition point between the head, seat of the intellect and the body, home of the senses, supports this view, and Itard pinpoints the neck as the site of vulnerability in the organism. 'I have always considered necks to be the most vulnerable part of the human body. There is something excruciatingly tender about them' (ibid:270).

These images tend to appear in the text at points marking the characters' fears of interior wildness, their sense of loss and desire for something unknown, yet familiar. Conversely, the images associated with Victor are of earth, light and water, the very stuff of life. Both water and light images are associated with circles, in shapes, spots, dapples,

round glasses and in the movements of ripples upon water, suggesting circular wholes rather than a linear progression in the way Victor interprets the 'real'.

The appearance of the repressed in the text at moments of awareness experienced by the characters are marked by striking images of keys, locks and doors. Dawson lifts Victor's obsession with keys from the real account and works the image of the key into a powerful symbol of potential release. Victor continually plays with keys but he is unable to use them for their proper purpose. Requiring the actions of Guerin or Itard to fulfil his desire for open doors, yet he is the holder of the keys by which all three may be set free. At Madame Guerin's first encounter with Victor, at the moment when she senses that he knows all her secrets, she feels her keys jangle in her pocket (ibid:13). Similarly, when Itard first encounters Victor, a door clangs in the Institute (ibid:10) whether open or shut we are not told, such is the ambiguity of their meeting. Perhaps the most powerful of these images is in Itard's statement at the end of the novel:

I am standing at an enormous door, holding your beloved bunch of keys. Like you, I cannot use them. They are perhaps the wrong keys, the wrong doors. I do not know how to fit them, how to turn them. I only know that we have keys, you and I, and words, and locks (ibid:280).

Thus keys, doors and locks are associated with words. Although Itard is speaking of the keys to language acquisition, to the successful transformation of Victor into a speaking subject, the reader's awareness of the metaphorical nature of the images of keys and locks when linked to language, suggests a deeper rhythm in the text, the trace of the semiotic which constitutes the revolutionary potential of the text from Kristeva's perspective. It is

the sensing of the rhythm rather than a direct consciousness of it in the text that leads the reader to question the functions of language and the way it directs the social and political practices of daily life.

It is not wholly possible to reconstruct the poetics of a writer by analysing her text, but the seamless manner in which Dawson weaves heteroglossia, metaphor and metonymy to create the unstated rhythm that indicates the chora must involve huge skill and meticulous planning, yet is so complex that it is impossible to believe that planning alone can account for the production of such a text. Umberto Eco, in his *Reflections of the Name of the Rose* (1994), discusses the possible meaning of the presence of multiple interpretations with the text which are only revealed by readers, not having been consciously planned by the author. For Eco, it is multiplicity which is the defining factor of the literary text. 'I would define the poetic effect as the capacity that a text displays for continuing to generate different readings, without ever being completely consumed' (1994:8). Yet although there is a conscious awareness of this multiplicity, the process itself must be unconscious if it is to replace the singularity of conscious thought with the links and associations of the semiotic. If, as Kristeva argues, writing is a sublimatory activity for the writer as well as the reader, then writers must find ways of evading ego censorship in order to express their own drive impulses in the text. Obviously this cannot be achieved wholly by intellectual effort as this is governed by the consciousness which in turn is shaped by language; therefore the writer must in some way subvert the overt content of the words used without invoking censorship or descending into chaos. There is a delicate balance here between the written words and their capacity for ambiguity, musicality and visual imagery, capacities which appeal to the senses rather than the rational mind and in this way create a non-logical discourse within the text. The problem is again one of negotiation for the

subject in process, the writer faced with the blank page. It is not a matter of writing without thinking, but rather of consciously setting the conditions in which association and play might take place, within the safe boundaries of Kristeva's 'discourse guardrails' (1984:209), of creating a writing practice, a poetics that allows the semiotic and the multiplicity of the real to slip into the text.

Exploring the work of other writers and their attempts to include this multiplicity creates a consciousness of a writing community and a body of writing which subverts the hegemony of established social practice. The development of a conscious awareness of this possibility through the historical and theoretical analyses of the image of the feral child in these chapters has determined the form and style of the novel *Consider The Lilies*. At the same time it has structured a writing practice which will continue to influence future work, and the location of such a practice within a writing community enhances the revolutionary potential of the individual text. The next chapter traces the journey in which the writing practice and the text created each other.

Chapter Four

A Poetics Of Wildness

It begins with the title of a book which attracts me, Michael Newton's *Savage Girls And Wild Boys* (Newton, 2002), but this is not really the beginning. The title drops into the sea of images, symbols, associations and experiences that is my life, of which my writing persona is but part.

The title intrigues me. I have always been drawn to wildness, the marginal, the alternative, the vaguely resistant, though admittedly not too resistant. A strong consciousness of self makes me walk with caution. The cover too, stimulates my curiosity; sepia, blurred images of boy and girl, not quite situated in any time but with a certain nostalgia, suggesting something old and yet modern, something half known. The children are simultaneously cute and uncanny, not really feral but vaguely menacing. They look at me with expressions that seem to hide secrets; sad but slightly aloof.

The book is in my hands, Pandora's box. Its contents electrify me, a record of feral children throughout history, an exploration of the concerns and passions of their contemporary cultures, a drawing together of questions about human nature in the

ambiguous image of the feral child hanging somewhere between the human and the animal.

These children have something I want, something I must pursue, although I do not yet know what that something is. Now I am reading ferociously, amorphously: real cases, history, philosophy, psychology, fiction. I begin to see themes of wildness focused in the image. There is innocence and a kind of freedom from the constraints of civilisation, a freedom that is envied by those trapped in such constraints. There is criticism of decadence and corruption. There is loathing of the animal, fear of the uncontrollable power of animality and horror at the possibility of its being ineradicable under the veneer of culture that we have assumed. The defamiliarised image of the feral child foregrounds how the 'odd' are marginalised by the 'normal', how skills other than those relevant to the symbolic order are suppressed by the majority for whom consciousness is bound by language, rationalism and logic. And at the extreme of marginalisation the feral child becomes a freak, on show to curious audiences, yet even here there is the subversive, carnival atmosphere that can both empower and disempower the abnormal.

There is so much ambiguity, so many associations, threads and links forming and changing, but already I can sense something underlying, the song and the terror of the wild, although I can only put this in words now, retrospectively.

I read more, searching for clues in academic disciplines and theoretical perspectives that turn the image of the literary text this way and that and show the symbolic, metaphorical image of the feral child to be one of many facets. There is a babble of voices a multitude of images, in which I swim, like Coetzee in the waters around Cruso's island (Coetzee, 1987).

I know there is a story coming, but from where, from what? I become aware of bridges, connections, associations, leading to and from the image of the feral child. I can almost see the child, but not quite; as it forms, it disappears. In Mantel’s words, ‘When you stand on the verge of a new narrative, when you have picked your character, you stretch out your hand in the dark and you don’t know who or what will take it’ (Mantel, 2007:4).

History shows me temporal clusters, a relation that links the feral child to radical change. Awareness grows of the way writers use the image of the feral child to criticise the dominant hierarchies of their time.	Why? How are these links constructed? There is innocence, defamiliarisation, the carnivalistic discourse that challenges the official language and customs of the day, shifting, linking to and drifting from images of opposition and attraction, speaking/not speaking presence/absence thought/sensation
Theory discusses questions about language and civilisation, about human personality, the psyche and the rational ego, interior experience and outer reality, about the nature of being	
and about how the literary text might explore these questions.	linkages, gaps, associations, fragmentation, heteroglossia, speech absence create

Readings of real and fictional accounts	defamiliarisation
sharpen the character of the feral child,	link to
behaviours and skills drawn from Itard's	
account of Victor of Aveyron, a language	disrupted/disabled language
structure drawn from Susan Curtiss's study	present
of the 20 th century confined girl Genie	naming, non rationalising,
(Curtiss, 1977), the experience of	unculture
prolonged confinement, imagined and	amoral
constructed from images of the Bye Child	unsublimated drive
in Bernard MacLaverty's film of the same	
name (MacLaverty, 2003).	uncertainty about who I am, what I am, the
	world I live in.
I find recurrent images in the work of other	
authors: associating wordlessness with the	solidifying associations of wordlessness
feral child, with a wild and innocent nature,	and wildness
(Dawson, Walsh, Rogers ¹²); with the	
speechless savage dramatically in the	
image of Friday's amputated tongue	
(Coetzee, 1987). There are images too of	
the divided subject, contrasting the rational	inner and outer
and logical with the emotional and	conscious and unconscious

¹² Dawson, J.(2003) *Wild Boy*. London: Hodder & Stoughton: Paton Walsh, J. (1994) *Knowledge of Angels*. London, QPD: Rogers, J. (1991) *Mr Wroe's Virgins*. London: Faber & Faber.

irrational in Dawson, Walsh and Fuller¹³
and images too of the need for these
divisions to be reconciled.

And there are images of lost, or dead
children; Susan Barton’s daughter in *Foe*,
Madame Guerin’s baby son in *Wild Boy*,
Ovid’s lost Child in Malouf’s *An
Imaginary Life* and the enduring sense of
loss as the characters search for these
missing children which I relate to our
longing for the inaccessible chora after
reading Kristeva.

These suggest quest, unity and separation,
resolutions and uncertainties.

Plans begin to form, tentative novelistic
structures and character sketches. I am
struck by a reading of Mackey (1990) about
the sensation remaining of presence in an
amputated limb, long after the amputation
has taken place; how the empty space still
maps the lost limb in the sensations of the
being. A few days later I read that Bakhtin

power in unity

irretrievable loss
uncanny, the half known, inaccessible,
forgotten, the lost limb, the lost child
leaking into the text. It is only as I write
this that I become aware of this reading of
Jack’s dead daughter in *Consider The
Lilies*, when I had consciously inserted the
child only as a plot device to explain Jack’s
obsession with finding Vicky.

unreachable yet remembered

repeated like this

I discover this link in my journal,

¹³ Fuller, J. (2005) *Flawed Angel*. London:Chatto & Windus.

had an amputated leg.	unexpectedly, and on re-reading, other
Such serendipitous promptings	repeated themes and images, of the lost, the
need to be recognised,	missing, of babble and silence.
included.	
Faulkner's <i>The Sound And The Fury</i> grew	
from the image of Caddie climbing a tree	The power of these single images to stir the
(Brylowski, 1968).	writer
Fowles's <i>French Lieutenant's Woman</i>	is revealing
developed from the image of a woman	linking to metaphor/metonymy
looking out to sea. (Fowles, 1977).	as sublimation
Characters begin to form: the feral	as catharsis.
girl/woman at different ages: the disabled	The negotiation of reality, psychosis and
man: the woman so afraid of her child she	neurosis.
must keep it locked out of (even her own)	
sight: the suicidal abject.	
Whose stories am I telling here? It is my	I must tell my story
own, my culture's, but am I not stealing the	but
lives of marginalised and vulnerable	what is revealed is not known to me
people, making them into composites to	and what the reader reads is not known to
suit my purpose? Which is?	me.
Not to tell their stories at all but to tell a	
story within a story, foregrounding a	This not knowing is in and under the text.

freedom within oppression, a possibility of resistance.

Do I romanticise deprivation and the way our society treats its misfits? Do I care that I am silencing some aspects of 'reality' to emphasise others?

The characters as metaphors must be made explicit

This links to Kristeva and Freud, approaching the possibility of releasing the semiotic in the text.

The text is a tissue, a fine web to contain/express jouissance and the abject. Gradually this becomes a conscious ideal; an attempt to deal, to gamble, with the unconscious, to address the unspeakable.

Can this be shown? That the story is not the story at all, in its playfulness, its idiosyncrasies?

But perhaps what I think is the metaphor is not the metaphor at all but some other figure that has crept into the text without my knowing, because the metaphor must elude the writing 'I'.

In my journal there are dream sequences, a beautiful fish leaping out of and returning to water, its myriad scales glittering: a falcon, wild free and dangerous, both threatening and welcoming me: a dark room which I must enter, in which I dimly perceive wonderful statues, yet when I approach it the ground, the walls, dissolve and I am left falling.

Out of this fluid mix a text was produced, yet this was not really the process at all. The order described was not the real order, the pattern and pages are not the actual pattern,

only a suggestion of the process, an attempt to approach the coalescing of a writing practice round a particular subject, the feral child. This process on the page cannot avoid the retrospective viewpoint which shapes it, nor reflect the constantly changing nature of the progressing work altered by reflection and reworking as new knowledge; new ways of seeing affect both conscious and unconscious thinking. It is impossible to re-construct the process but we can perhaps suggest its unique trajectory, the concrete evidence of which is the new text and its gift, a re-constructed author, not forgetting the potential new reader who will be affected by the reading of it.

The text as product

The text produced by this process is at once intertextual and unique. Ideas, words, thoughts of other authors, philosophers, theorists are channelled through a personal perspective that itself changes as new ideas are incorporated to create a specific view of the subject in process. Although this is an individual perspective it is not the single world view of the author, on the contrary it is a perspective of inclusion, reflecting the multiplicity of everything and the fluidity of being.

If the point of the text is this perspective, do the story, the characters and plot really matter? In Hilary Mantel's article, 'Ghost Writing' first published in *The Guardian* (17.11.2007), the unsayable is explored through the mythical tale of Orpheus and Eurydice. If, as Mantel says, 'Every book that is written is the ghost of possibilities that were in the artist's head,' then the characters, the feral child, Mantel's lost Eurydice, are catalysts, causing us to reach for 'the unsayable thing we are always trying to say' (Mantel, 2007:8) and beneath the phenotext, every story is the same. Bringing this awareness out into the text, into the consciousness of the author and the reader is the real

product, the purpose of the literary text. Such a text produces the author for the author and for the reader, also the reader for the reader. The author then is very much alive, if hiding in the text, constantly re-writing the self, making writing a narcissistic activity in an endless circle of drive and sublimation.

The concrete work may seem a dead object, frozen in time, fixed forever on the page, but awareness of the unspeakable, flowing within it, exposes the partiality of language, of writing. What is written, the images used and the way they are presented is then important in the way the work engages the unconscious, the non-linguistic, and allows it to permeate the text. Formal devices are crucial. The polyphonic novel presents plurality, a clamour of discourses and registers that exposes the imposition of order on a non-ordered 'real'. The voices surrounding the feral child might include the viewpoints of peers and family, the scientific discourses of medicine, the curious and carnivalistic discourses of newspaper reports, narratives of independent observers at different times, in a variety of settings. In the clash of these voices the image of the child is made to turn, showing different faces, ambiguity, plurality, alternative perspectives. Into this clamour drops the silence, the absence of the child's voice, proposing the value of wordlessness, the non-linguistic.

Experiment and play with formal language structures in the text also produces challenge, making visible the constraints by which language shapes meaning. Such play does not destroy language but kicks against these structures, weakening their hold. The text thus remains readable, does not descend into chaos, reflecting our human need to mediate experience through language.

Giving voice to the feral child provides a rich source of possibilities for this play. While writing *Consider The Lilies* I carefully constructed Vicky's language from patterns

drawn from real feral children. Although some fictional licence was taken, I was amazed how easily the real language patterns corresponded to the effects of fragmented sequence and logic that I wanted to achieve.

Experiment with arrangements of the sentences on the page also provides the author with opportunities to question the accepted practices of writing and reading, drawing the reader into the text and engaging him/her in developing awareness of choice. Thus in *Consider The Lilies* I chose at times to present the viewpoints of Jack and Vicky in adjacent columns rather than in the traditional sequential form. I planned this to suggest the simultaneity of two people thinking at the same time and to prevent the sequential gaps on the page between speakers which prompt the reader to reflect on and order meaning. I deliberately tried to avoid creating such prompt points in the columns which would indicate a cross over from one to the other, so that readers (including myself, re-reading) would have to make conscious choices about how to read these pages, choices which would doubtless be different on any occasion they were read by the same or different readers.

Is a text produced by such devices revolutionary in Kristeva's sense? It needs to be more than simply a reflection of a society in flux, reforming after the failure of earlier hegemonies, such as religion and the god of science; more than an affirmation of multiculturalism. The revolutionary potential of the text lies in its challenge to subjectivity, in the radical questioning of what each subject thinks it is. This kind of text aims to produce change in the speaking subject, by calling up the lost child. The amoral image of the feral child, existing on the ambiguous borders of humanity and social being, is the very embodiment of resistance to repression.

The sense of estrangement, of unconnectedness, of something missing, which permeates so many contemporary literary texts is at once a personal and collective sense of loss, thus politicising the image of the feral child in so far as it represents this loss. If we may define the postmodern text by a sensed lack of centre, of meaning, a loss of identity linked to culture, this is not to say such texts mourn or present abject pictures of emptiness. Contemporary fiction that incorporates the image of the feral child celebrates freedom, innocence and joy, as well as the fear of wildness, its amoral presence and its uncontrollable animality. This addressing the unspeakable, the semiotic chora, through the image of the feral child and the distortion of symbolic systems, aims for the expression of *jouissance* through the sublimatory activities of writing, and of reading. The dynamics of this expression improve unity in the subject, reducing alienation and focusing the life-affirming instincts. Although the feral child is a catalyst producing this result, it is only one of many possibilities, and this result is not singular but a multiple and ongoing musicality of many voices.

Subjectivity and the author - a personal journey

How does this process of writing transform the author? I can only speak through my own experience, incorporating reflections on the comments of other authors. When I began investigating the image of the feral child, I was thinking logically of how humanity is defined; of the marginalisation of individuals who do not fit accepted norms. My writing prior to this reflected my background in social sciences and mental health nursing and involved a desire to protest about the way mental health issues are dealt with in our society. I believed I had something to say. But even then writing was a selfish activity, seeking a satisfaction of expression; it was that feeling of abandoning oneself to writing,

to the sensation described by Forster of someone else holding the pen, resulting from the sway of associations which distracts the writer from writing on the given subject of his/her choice (Forster, 1945).

A gradual awareness that I was writing about the (my) self as much as any specific social issue developed, visible in questions in my journal about 'who or what am I at this moment in history?' Yet this awareness of the writing self is not the self-satisfaction of the knowledgeable author who teaches, who has a message for the world. On the contrary, the aim of this new author is 'to disappear into the text, into a desire for discovery' (DuPlessis, 1990:172), through the practice of the devices discussed earlier. By the creation of heteroglossia and fragmentation, sidestepping the phenotext, the semiotic genotext is produced somewhere beyond the conscious control of the knowledgeable author. The awareness of this practice enables it to be harnessed to form a poetics which may provide the conditions to reproduce this process in an endlessly shifting variety, keeping the tenuous relation of conscious to unconscious fleetingly visible, functional and productive in the text. This relation, while intensely personal, exploring the alienation and vulnerability of me as object, because it is common to all civilised humans, is at the same time unmistakably social. A journal entry as late as February 2009 records a dream of exposure, of being fired on while witnessing a bank robbery, trapped in a blank empty yard with no way to escape, nowhere to run, nowhere to hide ... except perhaps in the text. Pondering on Bernstein's description of art as conversation, (Bernstein, 1992), I ask who I am talking to and the answer comes back, myself. What my self tells me is that there is a monster inside me, an undefined power that rarely escapes, bursting out in occasional gasps and snatches of high emotion and leaking into the sublimated activity of writing. No matter how I try, its whole beauty and

terror can never be known. At this point in the journey I arrive at an awareness that 'I have nothing to say, I am but a ghost storyteller, like Susan Barton in *Foe* (Coetzee: 1987). I realise, reflecting on my journal, that this knowledge was present all along, in my endless reaching out for something else besides words, that it was hidden in the words that I wrote, but only now do I begin to know that, and it is still only a beginning.

I cannot reveal the unspeakable or say the unsayable. I can only perhaps reveal the desire for it, say the longing. As Kristeva argues, the chora can be designated but never posited. It can never be given axiomatic form (Kristeva 1984:26). Kundera (1986) states that the author's purpose is to teach the reader to ask questions, but I would argue that the author can only teach himself/herself and invite the reader to do the same. Readers too, may teach authors, glimpsing aspects of the text that are hidden from the censoring consciousness of the writer. Readers play a crucial role in the social life of texts. The public text, a frozen object, converts to living tissue, mediated through the minds and bodies of readers who sound the content for personal and communal resonances. This is beyond the author's control. The text is appropriated for the purposes of others, for their own sublimatory activities, the author's meaning not their meaning, their meaning not for the author to direct. The text for the author has already served its purpose.

Is it then necessary for the author to consider the reader at all? Can a book that is never read, a painting that is never publicly viewed, still be considered to be art? I would argue that it is, because of the primary transformation effected on its creator. The product of writing, the text, creates an invitation to be read but reader participation is not essential to fulfil a revolutionary potential in the text, because the production of the text itself produces change in the author. Reader participation cannot in any case be accurately predicted or planned. The process which leads a reader to participate in a specific text is

intensely personal and unknown to the writer. However, feedback received from readers following the publication of *Consider The Lilies* has provided me with numerous versions of the text, each slightly different and unique so that the text is constantly renewed for me in the interaction with readers.

The writing practice then primarily concerns the writer writing for himself/herself. Although a purely narcissistic activity, this selfishness includes all possibilities. Like the feral child, it is amoral, as Kristeva says (1984:56); it may know every perversity but disarms them by adhering to none.

To conclude, tracing the journey begun by exploring the image of the feral child, reveals a process, the gradual formation of a writing practice, but this poetics seems to become a solidifying paradigm, a template of relatively fixed themes by which writing proceeds. It is true that this poetics of wildness produces a template, an order, but its attention to the play of language, to the linking and breaking down of associations in the attempt to touch the semiotic chora, prevents stasis and promotes process and fluidity. Such a poetics recognises that what may order the text at one moment may not do so at another and that each new experience changes the whole in some way.

Reflection on what has been written brings retrospective awareness but also looks forward to future suggestions and propositions. Mantel argues that ghosts may be apparitions of the future, not of the dead, but of what might be, what we may yet write (2007:6).

This poetics is a shifting mapping of experience, resulting in a coalescence of images that can only be temporary. In this case, the relation of wildness to wordlessness, of language and the subject to the unconscious - which allows the semiotic to escape into the text and thus imbues it with revolutionary potential in some degree - creates one

justification of writing, answering the question posed by Robert Sheppard, ‘Why (do) you continue writing?’ (Sheppard, 1999:54), but this is only one of a myriad possibilities.

Throughout the development of this poetics and its practice, the feral child has haunted me, hung on to me, and only now, when I see myself changed by the writing of the text, does it begin to let me go, to shift its shape into new forms of ambiguity, new streams of story, those infinite ghosts of writings that may yet be written.

PART B

CONSIDER THE LILIES

A NOVEL

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Chapter One

“We don’t want any bad habits here mate – know what I mean?”

Ray’s eyes glitter at me under his cap. He looks like a bad habit himself rather than a saviour, but I can’t refuse his offer of a roof over my head on a wet night.

“Yeah,” I say. It takes all my breath to keep up with him on the uneven paving and it’s raining – that drizzle that gets into every crevice.

“Down here,” he turns into a side street and I wonder what I’m walking into but what’s the point? It’s two in the morning and even now the back streets of Liverpool aren’t quiet. The dispossessed are ever roaming but down here it’s as still as it gets. Nevertheless, I’m nervous. There’s that don’t- walk- alone kind of menace you get in an empty street.

“Here,” he points down an alley. I wonder why me? What made him pick me up off the street tonight, when I’m at such a low point, pain throbbing through my hip, breaching my defences, letting the memories push through? Maybe I’ve read him wrong but I’ve got

nothing to lose if he turns nasty. No point in doing me except for the pure psychopathic pleasure of it and he doesn't look that type.

We turn into a back yard with no gate and through a pathway lined with bags of rubbish. I think of our house; of Corinne and Angela. Corinne used to nag me about the garden. I refused to have a gardener but never had time to look after it myself. I wonder who lives there now?

This house has boarded windows. Ray gives a series of knocks on the back door, which still looks fairly sound, despite the scabby paint. I'm still back at that other house, my home, standing under the flowering cherry by the pond, until the door opens.

"What's your name?" Ray says, distracting my attention so I don't look at the person behind the door, only the shadow as the door closes after me.

"They call me the Hermit." The hall smells of cigarettes, candle-wax and damp and there's a dark room that looks like a kitchen. He's leading me up bare stairs and I can see into doorless rooms below, full of shadows thrown by guttering candles. It's a fire trap waiting to happen except you can smell the whole place is so rotten damp it would never ignite. There are dim shapes: murmurings and mutterings like a mutinous crowd. We come to a landing, go up another set of stairs. The room he brings me to is dark and empty.

"You'll have to share."

Even without light I can see there's nothing here except an empty fireplace and something that might be a mattress or bedding against one wall.

"Okay by me." I slip the pack off my back on to the floor. What a relief. There's a door in one corner of the room, a built-in wardrobe or something.

He's watching me. "Got a bad leg?"

“Yeah.” Right now it aches like fuck.

I go over to the cupboard and open the door. A great hiss comes out at me and I jump back quicker than I would have thought possible. “Jesus, what is it?” I almost lose my balance and my hip screams as it twists. Only the wall stops me from falling. All I remember is a pair of eyes rolling black and white like spotted eggs and a lot of very sharp-looking teeth.

Ray’s laughing at me. “It’s okay. It’s only Cupboard Girl.”

‘Calm down,’ I tell myself and get the primus stove out of my pack and set myself to the familiar routine of making a brew.

“Organised aren’t you?” His voice sounds mocking.

“You didn’t say I had to share with a fucking she-wolf.” My fingers shake as I light the stove.

“She’s okay. She’s just scared. She’ll be all right when she gets to know you.”

I settle myself on the floor. There’s a circle of light from the stove. It’s dark and peaceful after the watchfulness needed on the streets, but there is fear in the room, mine and hers, and that stops me relaxing. Stirring the water in the pan is soothing. I don’t have to stay here, I could be on my way right now, but it’s cold and wet outside, I’m tired and my leg –

“What’s your story?” He rolls a fag. I look at the tobacco tin and he looks at my pan of water. I get out the milks and sugar sachets I picked up in McDonalds earlier in the day and find two squashed paper cups in my pack that are reasonably clean. He offers me the tin. I don’t smoke much but I take it and roll up.

“I dunno,” I say. “Haven’t got one.” I’m too tired for parlour talk.

“Everyone’s got one.” He squints at me as he lights up. “What happened to your leg?”

“War,” I accept a light and drop a tea bag in the pan. It’s one I used earlier but he won’t know that.

“Which one?”

“It doesn’t matter.” I can’t be bothered elaborating the lie. I just don’t want to tell him the truth.

“It’s permanent then?”

“Yeah.” I pour the tea.

He keeps asking things but I don’t answer. We smoke our fags and drink our tea then the silence gets awkward and he goes away. I settle myself in my sleeping bag but let the stove burn for a few minutes. The blue flame takes my mind off the shadows and the thing in the cupboard. I keep staring at the door, straining my ears but not a sound comes out. Is it - she - asleep or like me, sitting motionless, listening? I turn the stove off, listen to the clicking noises as the metal cools. Other noises float up from below but can’t dispel the silence in the room. I can’t sleep. Her eyes are in my mind. I try to think of something else and then the nightmare begins. I can see Angela. Her face is white. Her hair is matted with blood. I can see Corinne. Her face is grey. Her eyes are blank. Her fingers claw hate on my shoulders. I’d give anything for a Glenfiddich, but that’s a door that I’ve shut. Corinne is shouting. I can’t make out the words because someone is screaming but I know she’s saying that it’s all my fault and then someone comes and gives me an injection and I slip...

man sleep oldgreybeardman

sleep bed warm bed

beardoldgreyman sleep warm

sleepnoise nonoise

sleepnoise nonoise

sleepnoise nonoise

sleepnoise nonoise nonoise

nonoise sleepnoise nonoise

sleepnoise nonoise

sleepnoise nonoise

sleepnoise nonoise

nomorenoise greyoldbeardman vicky

wakeup vicky sleep vicky go sleep

nomore stopit

oldgreybeardman not hurt not hit not kill

vicky oldgreybeardman wakeup vicky

nomore stopit oldgreybeardman sad

sleep sad

I'm awake suddenly and know better than to move, even though I'm still half asleep and I just lie here, hardly breathing in the strange darkness. For a moment I don't know where I am, then I remember.

I can't see anything. My stuff is safe, I've got it in my sleeping bag with me but something's wrong. Gradually I begin to see a little in the dark. Someone's standing over me, watching. I can feel my muscles rising and falling with every breath as I struggle to hold myself still.

oldgreybeardman nonoise nonoise
nonoise

oldbeardgreyman no sleep eye move
no sleep no body move

see vicky vicky scared vicky no body
move

oldgreybeardman scared scared
vicky

no hurt vicky

greyoldbeardman talk vicky not
know

talk

I slit my eyes open just a fraction and
it's a few moments before I realise it's
the girl from the cupboard.

Is she going to attack me? Maybe
she's got a knife or something but she's
just standing there and I start to feel bad
about the way I'm thinking about her.
She's another human being isn't she?

The fear in the room is going down
and I start to relax. Being on the street
makes you like this – ready for anything.
You may be free of the niceties that
stopped you being you but you've got to
be ready to drop into hell at any moment.

Time now for some parlour talk.

“Hi. Can't you sleep?”

I try to whisper but it sounds like a
cannon going off. There's an immediate
charge in the room but she doesn't move.
Should I risk sitting up?

“They call me the Hermit. How about

talk

you?"

Nothing.

This is stupid. How long has she been standing there? Has she been in the cupboard all night or did she sneak out into that nest of a bed after I'd gone to sleep?

vicky know

I want to get up and take a piss but I daren't move yet. I don't know what to do if she's not going to say anything. Maybe she can't talk. Maybe she can't hear. Ray never said.

Why does she just keep standing there? Does she want me to do something?

vicky know oldgreybeardman not like
vicky not like ray not like
doctorsoames not like rita not like
oldgreybeardman like bird in street
vicky see bird in street car run over bird
not walk bird not walk leg leg
greyoldbeardman jump vicky scared

I can't see in the dark what she's like. I guess she's not a young woman, she's got the thickset outline that comes with middle age, though it's difficult to tell, could just be clothes.

Her eyes gleam white in the dark, not as bad as before but I can't help shuddering and suddenly she squats down

greyoldbeardman scared

and puts her hands right on my false leg.

I freeze, although in my mind I've hit the ceiling.

run vicky run

How could she know?

I open my eyes fully and look at her. I can't stop myself sitting up and at once she's up and off like a deer, the cupboard door squealing shut and I'm left here thinking about those quick dim images: her nostrils quivering like a wary dog sniffing out answers; gentleness in her eyes as she examined me and the touch of her hands asking questions of the metal and leather of my leg. There's something familiar about her but I just can't get hold of it.

okay in cupboard dark no

oldgreybeardman come no man

come vicky hold door no man come

I've got to piss but don't know where and everyone seems to have disappeared so I go down to the back door and piss in the yard. It's cold and quiet. The stars are fading in the greyness as dawn comes. I look up and remember Ray asking about my leg as we came into the room so that

okay vicky okay

explains how she knew about it, doesn't
it?

Light squeezes round the boards on the windows when I wake and the mattress in the corner is empty. Faint street noises come into the room. I listen for clues, trying to get my bearings. It can't be far from Bold Street, that's where I met Ray last night but in the dark and the struggle to keep up with him I lost my sense of direction when we turned off somewhere after the ruined church.

In the room scraps of grimy wallpaper speak of past home comforts. Once, this was someone's cosy bedroom. At home, our bedroom was decorated in quiet shades of green. It's like a scene in a story I once read. It's tempting to picture happy times: Corinne and I cuddled together, Angela bouncing on the bed, but those times didn't last. I close the book. The cupboard door is shut and I can't hear anything inside.

I shoulder my pack and set out in search of Ray. There's just enough light to see by. On the landing one floor down I find a door with TOILET scrawled on it in black felt pen. Inside, it smells but it's reasonably clean and there is water in it. I take my pants down and sit gingerly. My hip hurts and I wonder how many painkillers I have in my bag and if I've enough money to get more. The toilet pan is sturdy and takes my weight without rocking. It's an old fashioned cistern with a long chain. When I pull it there's a healthy flush and I get a small shower on my head. There's even a toilet roll. I'm almost happy as I go down the final set of stairs.

No sign of Ray but there's a woman moving round in the back of the house where we came in last night. It's a kitchen or once was one. There's a cooker that looks unused and

none of the paraphernalia you'd expect in a working kitchen, but there's a sink with taps and water running out.

The woman fills a plastic cup. She turns and looks at me, weighing me up as she drinks from the cup.

"Hi, I'm Rita. Who are you?"

"They call me the Hermit. Ray brought me last night."

"Ray's our Good Samaritan." She smiles, drains the cup and fills it again. I can see right away she's no smackhead. She's thin but she looks strong and capable. She's wearing a long skirt, a brown cardigan and woolly socks. She's got a bandanna tied round her head and auburn hair pokes out round the edges.

"You new round here? I don't know your face." She's studying me again, making me feel uncomfortable. I take my pack off and start setting up my stove.

"Can I get some water?" I assume there's no electricity, going on the state of the kitchen and the candles last night. She holds her hand out for the bottle, fills it and gives it back to me. She's waiting so I have to answer.

"I've been around for a while."

"You're not a scouser." She says it pleasantly but I sense a hidden accusation.

"No." That's as far as I'm willing to go right now and she looks at me and decides to respect that.

"I'm from Croxteth." I don't know where that is but it doesn't matter. "I left my husband." She drains the cup again and looks at me. It's a sign that's as far as she wants to go and that's okay with me.

"How many people are here?" I stir the water and give her the two cups from last night to rinse out. It's easier to ask questions when you're doing something practical.

“These are manky.” She puts them in a bag of rubbish, opens a cupboard and takes out a roll of unused plastic cups.

“About twelve. It varies.” She laughs and the pleasure in it surprises me. “People come and go.”

“So who’s in charge?” I give her one of the cups of tea.

“Got sugar?” She keeps her hand open as I dole out the sachets, closing her hand when I get to four. “Thanks. I don’t know. No one really. We just all muck in.”

“Yeah?” My voice is full of sarcasm. I’ve been in squats before. She looks hurt.

“Course we have problems, but it works. You’ll see.”

“I don’t plan to be here long enough to see. How long have you been here?”

“Three weeks.”

I laugh and she looks nervous.

“I was in a refuge before, but my husband found me.” She looks down and picks at her skirt. “What time is it, do you know?”

I shrug. “Feels about nine o’clock. That girl – woman upstairs: Cupboard Girl. What’s that all about?”

She smiles. “Vicky? Is that where Ray put you? The house must be full. We usually try to leave her alone.”

So she’s got a name. Vicky. Sounds normal, ordinary, a schoolgirl’s name or a page three girl. Victoria - posh, regal, a plum, an it girl, not that thing in the cupboard. Then I remember her gentle touch on my leg. It’s difficult to marry the two images. Do they leave her alone because she’s dangerous?

“What’s her story?”

“Who knows?” She shrugs. “She doesn’t say much.”

“She can talk then?”

“Oh yes, in her own way.”

“What does she do?”

“Do?” She looks at me puzzled.

“Well, she can’t stay in the cupboard all the time. Food? Drink? Money?”

Someone else comes into the kitchen. He’s tall, skinny and looks miserable as sin.

“Hi Peter,” Rita says brightly.

“Going to rain all fucking day.” He looks at the boarded window, takes a cup from the roll and rinses it out before filling it with water. He eyes our cups before drinking from his. He looks like he’s been having nightmares all night. I’m glad we’ve almost finished our tea, I’ve got no intention of brewing up for the whole house. I start packing up my bag. Rita follows me into the hall.

“Sally Army caff’ll be open.” She shuts the door on Peter. “Fancy some breakfast? I’ll treat you.”

I want to say no but I’m curious about Cupboard Girl. “I’ve got my own money. I’ll get my sleeping bag.”

“You can leave it upstairs, it’ll be okay,” she says but I’m already climbing the stairs.

“I don’t think I’ll be coming back,” I say from the landing.

In the Sally Army caff, Rita fills me in on the house rules and the residents over tea and bacon sandwiches. The house is in the top half of Falkner Street, which is pretty well what I’d figured.

“Never use the front door, only the back.”

“Goes without saying.”

“And you need to use the special knock. I’ll show you when we get back.”

“What if no one’s in?”

“There’s always someone in.” She’s laughing at me as she takes a bite of her sandwich. “If it does happen that no one’s in, there’s a key hidden in the yard. I’ll show you. Let me tell you about the others.”

I’m not really interested in them, only in Cupboard Girl, but I let her rattle on while I’m eating.

“There’s Peter. You saw him before. He’s a bit of a drag, always looking on the bad side. I think he used to be in a mental hospital although he doesn’t talk much.”

“Clinically depressed,” I say. “Who isn’t nowadays?”

“And there’s Mabel. She’s a tough old boot. She told me she’s seventy two and she’s been on the streets for five years. Mind you she’s always bladdered, but the drink makes things bearable, doesn’t it? I like a drink myself.” Her voice tails off and she looks at me.

In the light I can see the signs; a slight tremor, a liverish colour. I realise she’s younger than she looks, perhaps only about twenty nine. I see myself in the kitchen, watching breakfast TV. There’s a tumbler of Glenfiddich on the worktop. Corinne has already rushed off to her job at Caddick and Co., otherwise the whisky wouldn’t be there. I’d promised her I wouldn’t drink before the evening.

“I don’t drink as much as I used to.” Her hand goes up and plays with the fringe of hair sticking out from the bandanna. “Not now that I’ve got away from Steve.”

She’s looking at me but she’s in some other place for a moment then she snaps back, smiles, lifts her mug again.

“There’s Kindi. She won’t tell us where she’s from but she’s got a Brummy accent. She’s only a kid. She ran away from home because her dad wanted to send her to Bangladesh to marry some feller she’d never seen. There’s two guys on the first floor, Russians or Czechs or something. They don’t speak hardly any English. I think they’re illegal immigrants.

“And Ray?” I drink my tea and look interested.

“Ray’s wife left him. Took the kids and ran off with a Scot. She lives in Glasgow and Ray never gets to see the kids. He just went to pieces. Lost his job and his house. He thinks the world of them kids. He doesn’t talk about it but one night me and him had a few drinks and got talking. He doesn’t care nothing about himself, but he looks after everyone else here. It’s like it gives him something to hang on to. He’s like a bloody social worker, except he doesn’t try to tell you what to do.”

“I’ll get some fresh tea.” I get up and gather the mugs. She’ll want to know about me next.

“And Cupboard Girl?” I say when I come back. “What about her?”

“We don’t know much about her.” She takes the tea, glances round the room. “She can talk but she doesn’t most of the time. She’ll answer you if you talk to her, sometimes, once she gets to know you, that is. When she does talk, most of it doesn’t make sense.”

“What do you mean?”

“She jumbles her words up. Sometimes you can figure it out in the end, or you think you do, but it’s hard work. You can’t have a laugh and a joke with her. She doesn’t seem to understand. She speaks funny too, sort of all one tone. We think she’s retarded, got out of a mental institution or home or something.”

“Care in the community?”

“Yeah,” she laughs, “that’s us. We all look after her.”

“Why?”

“I dunno. I really don’t know why we do it. She’s the only one doesn’t do any work, but we still look after her. Ray found her one night in a back street with three men. He heard her screaming. He went down the alley and the men ran off. She was in a right state.”

I’m struggling with the thought of being down an alley with those rolling eyes and vicious teeth but at the same time anger stirs. How can people mistreat someone like that?

“It was her own fault in a way. We felt sorry for her and that’s why we took her in but we soon found out that she likes men. Young men. These ones just went too far with her. You should be safe.” She looks at me and grins.

“So Ray brought her back here. What does she live on?”

“We all feed her. That’s all she seems to need really. We take her shopping sometimes. She loves the shops. She’s like a kid with toys. She shoplifts like mad, but sometimes we have to do that too. We just have to stop her because she’d get caught. She’s got no idea. Oh, but there’s a queer thing. Sometimes people just come up and give her things. Sometimes it’s money and if it was just that you could understand it because they feel sorry for her but sometimes it’s pieces of jewellery they’re wearing or a toy they’ve just bought for their kid. She just looks at them and they come over and give her things. It’s weird.”

“And the cupboard? Why does she live in the cupboard?”

“She doesn’t. Not all the time. It’s where she feels safe I suppose, when something threatens her. She goes there when she’s scared. It must be something to do with her life before, but who knows what?”

“Doesn’t she ever talk about what happened to her before?”

“No. I’ve never heard her.”

vicky wake up oldgreybeardman gone vicky hungry rain outside sad air sad
vicky go to kitchen peter in kitchen peter say what you want vicky wicky peter say
want cornflakes vicky peter get bowl get cornflakes get milk peter say fuck off vicky
get your own fucking cornflakes peter eat cornflakes cornflakes on face milk on face
spill milk on table peter sad bad inside black inside make vicky sad inside black
inside sadbadblack peter say what you fucking crying for you crazy cunt black comes
out of peter black all round peter vicky scared peter say what you fucking staring at
go get in your fucking cupboard peter mouth open cornflakes inside black come out
of peter mouth come to vicky vicky scared peter say fucking crazy bitch kindi come
in kindi say leave her alone peter peter say fucking crazy cunt kindi say she’s hungry
aren’t you vicky peter say she’s fucking nuts kindi get two bananas out of cupboard
kindi give vicky banana kindi eat banana vicky look at peter look at banana black
round peter peter bowl empty peter stand up go to door open door peter say fucking
rain vicky put banana in pocket vicky eat banana in cupboard no black peter in
cupboard kindi say it’s okay vicky vicky see rita come in gate oldgreybeardman
come in gate oldbeardgreymannoleg hurt vicky scared oldmangreybeard scared peter
rita come in rita say it’s okay vicky peter say fucking nutty cow rita say stopit peter
vicky say stopitstopitstopitstopit rita say stopit vicky okay vicky vicky say
nomorenomorenomore rita say stopit vicky oldbeardgreyman come in put bag on floor

kindi say it's okay vicky peter say back again staying are you rita say what's it to you
 peter say go and fuck yourselves peter go out of kitchen up stairs peter take black away
 up stairs vicky say sadblackpeter badsadpeter rita say it's okay vicky kindi say sit
 down vicky eat your banana vicky sit down oldgreybeardman sit down hurt
 oldgreybeardman put leg out straight noleg hurt red round leg oldmangreybeard not
 black rita not black kindi not black black go upstairs with peter rita say don't be scared
 vicky this is the hermit he is coming to stay for a bit oldgreybeardman say jack
 greyoildbeardman hold out hand vicky look at hand kindi say hi jack kindi hold
 oldgreybeardman hand vicky say hermitjack kindi laugh rita laugh that's right
 oldgreybeardman say hermitjack hermitjack laugh vicky laugh no black in kitchen
 rain outside vicky eat banana hermitjack take things out of bag hermitjack make tea
 hermitjack give vicky tea vicky like tea vicky like hermitjack hermitjack not black

In the kitchen when we come back, Rita and me, there's some kind of row going on;
 the air in the room is zinging with it. There're three of them in there. The Indian girl, thin
 as a knife, in jeans and tee shirt, must be Kindi. That long, streaky miserable guy, Peter, is
 still there, standing by the back door. Kindi stands between him and another woman.

The other woman has tears on her face but she's not crying now. Her eyes are
 squeezed shut and she's shouting, "Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!"

My insides are churning. Something is wrong here, something is happening to me. I
 don't know what it is and I'm scared.

Kindi leans towards her protectively. "Stop it, Vicky!"

So this is Cupboard Girl. Rita and Kindi are fussing round her, calming her down.

Peter looks at me slyly.

“Back again? Staying are you?” I can’t answer him, I’m too busy looking at Cupboard Girl. She’s not a girl, she’s a woman and in the daylight nothing to be scared of. So why am I getting alarm signals? My body chemistry’s practically out of control. She looks just like any forty-year-old bag lady you can see any day on the street; thin mousy hair cut with a knife and fork; shapeless skirt and sweater, but an odd touch, a bright lime green and blue scarf wound round her neck with careless style.

She senses my gaze and opens her eyes. My breath stops in my chest. I see Angela’s eyes staring at me, grey and full of tears. A thousand images of Angela crying flash before me. Joy rushes through me for a second, then terror strikes. This can’t be. Angela is dead. I visit her in the morgue every night. I see her blue-white face; the dried blood; her grey eyes, dead like stones. My leg gives way and I reach out for the chair in front of me.

Peter stomps out of the kitchen. Kindi says, “Sit down, Vicky,” and the moment is gone.

I sit down opposite Vicky. I sit carefully yet my hip still creaks with pain. I get my things out and make tea and feel her watching every move. The air is more relaxed now Peter has gone and I sense that Vicky doesn’t feel afraid of me but I’m still in turmoil. I won’t let myself look at her eyes. I keep telling myself I’m mistaken. Slowly I become calmer.

Rita introduces me. “Vicky this is the Hermit.”

Before I know it, I say, “Jack,” then immediately bite my lip. I’ve always made a point of never telling anyone my real name. What’s got into me?

Vicky says, “Hermitjack,” and everybody laughs. I stir the cups of tea. Ray comes into the kitchen. He too looks more normal in daylight, less haunted, despite the stubble on his chin. He rubs his hands together when I pass him a plastic cup half filled with tea.

“I’m going down to Lime Street station for a wash and brush up. Anyone coming?”

“Shall we go?” Kindi asks Rita. “Then we can go straight to the agency.”

Rita shrugs and smiles, gets up. Vicky looks from one to another.

“You stay here,” Rita says to Vicky. “You’ll be all right.” She smiles encouragingly.

“Decided whether to move on or not?” Ray looks at me, raises an eyebrow.

I look at Vicky. She’s staring at me and I can’t read her expression. Who is she? Where has she come from? What’s wrong with her? And why has she got the eyes of my fourteen year old daughter?

“Angela,” Vicky says and everything stops for me, inside and out.

“Are you okay?” Ray’s at my side. The others are staring. “You don’t look too good.”

“You’d better stay here for a while.” Rita puts her hand on mine.

“Yeah, I think I will, if it’s okay.” I turn off the stove.

quiet

all gone

It’s quiet in the kitchen once the others
have gone although there are muffled
noises upstairs reminding me that there

hermitjack sadsick

scared

see angela

make vicky sad

hermitjack not hurt

no

no stopit hermitjack

stopitstopitstopit

no redblack

hermitjack

not bad

hermitjack cross

run vicky

no

wait

are still people in the house.

I'm still stunned, don't know what to say, can't think even.

I just keep looking at her.

I know I never mentioned Angela. I never talk about her to anyone. It's only myself I torture with her memory.

So how does she know?

She sits there eating her banana and I want to shake her, shake it out of her.

The silence goes on. It gets harder to break. She jumps when I clear my throat.

"Vicky – you said 'Angela'."

She looks straight at me and again those grey eyes hit me. I hold my muscles tight so that I won't vomit.

"What do you mean, 'not bad'?"

She jumps. I realise I was shouting, scaring her. She drops the banana on the table and I can see she's poised to run. There's a delicacy about her, a faun like quality that belies her shapeless figure.

"Okay, Vicky, take it easy. It's okay."

okay, vicky

hermitjack redleg hurt

vicky eat banana

sweet sticky vicky like

hermitjack talk

talk vicky

nomoreangela

nomorebanana

itchy

My hip twinges sharply and the pain
radiates right down into the memory of
where my leg used to be, where she
touched me last night.

Christ, what kind of creature is she?
She knows about Angela, she knows
about my leg.

The painkillers are in my bag. I swill
them down with the last of the tea. I'll
need to get more somewhere today.

"How long have you been here Vicky?"
I pluck up the courage to look in her eyes.
She's not Angela and whatever she
knows I see no understanding there.

I don't think she understands what
I'm saying. She looks at me, then says,
"Vicky like banana."

"Yeah, bananas are good." I smile.
After a moment she smiles too but it's
like something she's realised you're
supposed to do. I try again.

"Where were you before? Before you
came here?"

itchy

want tickle

vicky itch

sore notleg

poor leg

nomore angela

nomore leg

car

silvercar

She stares at me. Her face is

unreadable. She squirms in her chair.

“I came yesterday.” It seems like a lifetime ago. “With Ray. You came – when? Last month?”

There must be some way of getting through to her. I rack my brains trying to think of what to say. My hip twinges again, sending another bolt of pain down my non-existent leg.

Suddenly she reaches forward and strokes my leg. There’s nothing sexual about it but there is curiosity in her fingers. Her hand’s moving down to the false part and I swear I can feel her touching it as if it were still flesh and not just metal. A memory shoots up in me so strongly that I feel it in my flesh, my no longer existing flesh; me and Jed playing badminton, my legs strong and athletic, leaping for the shuttlecock.

“Poor Hermit Jack,” she says and her eyes look full of tears.

itchy

She takes her hand away.

tickle now

“Vicky itch,” she says.

She shifts again. Her hand is up her skirt.

nice tickle

She’s playing with herself under the table, right in front of me. Blood rushes into my face and I look away, at the

yes, good

boarded window, not seeing anything. My leg still feels her touch. The same hand.

I’m bewildered. I want to get up and leave the room but I’m in a daze, I sense that she knows something, feels something about me. She can’t tell me but it’s in her touch. I feel this without being able to explain it to myself.

hermitjack angrysad...vicky go find
laszlonik

So I just sit there watching her wanking. Even though I’m disgusted I just can’t pull away from her.

“Don’t do that, Vicky,” I say weakly and it’s she who gets up and leaves me.

By the time I heave myself to my feet and get my bag together, I can hear her feet on the stairs and by the time I get to the bottom step, she's disappeared and I just hear the slam of a door somewhere.

She must be headed for the cupboard and I've half a mind to leave her to it at the thought of climbing all those stairs but I want to know more. What does she know about me?

I nearly fall over a huddled figure sitting on the top step on the first floor landing near the toilet.

"Has Vicky gone up?" My breath scrapes in my chest, slowing my words.

"Don't fucking bother. She's in the Russkies' room."

It's Peter. He's wearing a hoodie that's pulled right over his head and he's slumped with his head on his knees.

"Russkies?" I'm breathing easier now and the painkillers are starting to kick in.

"She's screwing them. She's always in there."

"What? Both of them?" I can't marry that innocent fragile look with this masturbating nympho and blurred into both images is Angela. I'm looking at all the doors. Which one is it? I want to kill them. She's an innocent.

"Told you, she's fucking crackers. She can't get enough of it."

I want to thump him as well but I remember Rita saying Vicky likes young men.

"What about you? Does she come on to you? And Ray?" I can hear anguish in my voice and suddenly I think, why should I care? I've only just met her and she means nothing to me – nothing. I've only seen her twice, yet it's as if she's got some kind of pull on me.

“I wouldn’t touch her with a bargepole. She’s probably riddled with all kinds.” There is slight movement from under the hood. “Anyway, it’d be like shagging a baby, wouldn’t it? And she’s old enough to be my mother.”

I turn and lower myself carefully down to sit beside Peter. He shrinks away from me towards the banister.

“Laszlo and Nik aren’t so fussy. They must be fucking desperate.”

I sit and wonder about Laszlo and Nik. My mind fills with pictures of what is going on behind that door. I don’t know the right thing to do. Should I break down the door and play the rescuing knight or would that frighten her away from me altogether? Peter’s gloom begins to envelop me. I can feel it weighing me down like a wet cloud.

“Anyway I wouldn’t care if she looked like Britney Spears. Sex, women, they just cause trouble. What’s the fucking point?”

Now I really look at Peter. The misery coming out of him is almost palpable. I want to ask if he’s getting medication but think better of it.

“Someone give you a bad time?”

“What do you fucking care?” He pushes himself further away from me, as if he wants to crawl right into the banister and become part of the rotten wood.

It doesn’t look too steady and I reach out a hand to stop him going through it but he pushes me away.

“You know fuck all, granddad.” The hood starts to slip and he pulls it down again, wraps his arms round his knees and begins to rock back and forth. “Just fuck off. Leave me alone.”

The door creaks open and Vicky comes out. I pull myself to my feet.

“Christ that was quick,” I say.

There is a muffled grunt from under the hood. Vicky looks at Peter, steps carefully round him to join me on the stairs.

“Hermitjack Vicky go shopping,” she says looking up at me and plucking my arm. In her hand she has a five pound note.

outside	It's still raining but not as heavily as
	before. It's good to get out of the house,
	away from the gloomy half light and
light	decrepit atmosphere; away from Peter
no sadpeterblack	and his depression. The pain in my leg
skynowall smell rain smell clean rain cold	is fading as we step into the damp air.
vicky mouth open rain cold in mouth	Outside in the alley she stops and turns.
vicky in rain	Her eyes are closed; her face is turned
rain on vicky rain in vicky	up to the rain. Round and round she
vicky smell flowers in rain	goes, letting the rain fall on her face.
	“Come on,” I say, but she takes no
	notice. I get my wool cap out of my
hermitjack cross vicky scared	pocket and put it on.

“Come on, you'll get wet.”

Impatience leaks through my voice. She

hermitjack scared

hermitjack put hood on vicky stop rain on

vicky hermitjack not cross not hurt vicky

big road car noise red car blue car black

car white van people noise foot noise

talk noise ladypinkcoat smell nice

ladyredumbrella push vicky vicky see

noroofchurch

black car black car black car

manbrowncoat smell bad

shops

shops

vicky like shops

stops and looks at me. The shock blanks my brain all over again. Her eyes are grey and clear. There is a sense of alarm in them as she studies my face.

“Come on.” I lift the hood of the old anorak she’s wearing up over her hair. I start to walk along and she follows.

We go down Falkner Street and Rice Street and into Pilgrim Street. It’s almost lunchtime and the pubs and cafes are opening up by the time we get to Bold Street. I can’t think of much to say. I’m trying to get myself together. I look at the street life going on around us. Today it seems surreal like one of those films where everything seems normal but you can tell something weird is going to happen any minute.

She turns, stares at people as they pass, stops here and there with her nose in the air like a dog. In the light I see she’s cleaner than I expected. Her mousy hair is shiny and her clothes are

bookshop toyshop clotheshop
shoeshop

fruitshop meatshop cakeshop
supermarket

foodsmell
vicky hungry vicky see caff

hungrythirsty
want coke

hermitjack say no point big road
vicky hungry see big shops little shops
ladybabypram baby cry make vicky want
cry

shabby but pretty clean. Kindi and Rita
must take her for a shower.

She's got nothing with her except
presumably the five pound note which
she must have tucked away somewhere.

I bet she keeps her belongings
upstairs in that cupboard. I wouldn't
leave anything in there myself, but then
maybe she hasn't anything worth
stealing.

Suddenly she says, "Hungry," and
points at a bistro on the other side of the
street. Smells of garlic and good coffee
waft across. I look at the window. It's
too pricey for the likes of us.

"Not here." I point towards Church
Street. Mcdonalds is more in our line.

She looks at me but doesn't say
anything. We walk on. Church Street is
full of shoppers and office workers on
early lunch breaks. The street is getting
re-surfaced so we're all crowded down
one side, but everybody's used to

no crybaby nocry

poorbaby

nicebluerabbit

baby cry no

no

vicky see balloons vicky like balloons

blue balloons silver balloons

red balloons green balloons

balloons have pictures

sofrabbit

bluebunnyfluffy

mcdonalds smell cheeseburgerfries

roadworks by now. It's all part of the Capital of Culture improvements and maybe it will look good when it's finished but I don't think I'll be around to find out.

Suddenly this woman comes over with a baby in a pram and gives Vicky a toy rabbit. Whatever went on I missed it while I was looking at the cranes behind the street façade and while I'm still wondering about it, Vicky pulls me towards a stall selling souvenir rubbish down a side street.

"The rabbit, Vicky. What happened? Why did she give it to you?"

She ignores me, her whole body's straining towards some balloons but I turn away and she follows. I watch her cuddling the rabbit and there's something almost alien about her till she glances at me with Angela's eyes and I forget everything. She's looking and sniffing at everything but I keep

cheeseburgerfriescoke vicky give
mcdonaldsman get money back

hermitjack get tea no cheeseburgerfries
cheeseburgerfries smell good vicky like

hungry

cheeseburgerfries taste good drink coke
like coke coke bubble make vicky
sneeze

walking automatically. My mind's a
blank until she tugs my arm and I look
up and see we're outside McDonalds.

She's straight up to the counter,
luckily there's no queue. She orders
cheeseburger, fries and coke with no
problem at all, paying for it with the five
pound note which she extracts from
somewhere inside her clothes. She takes
the change without counting it and puts
it in her anorak pocket. She's getting by
but does she understand money –
exchange? I doubt it.

I buy a cup of tea. I'm not really
hungry yet and I don't have much
money left. Soon I'll have to find a few
hours casual work but not until I'm
desperate.

We sit at a table some distance from
the doors and the counter. She nibbles
her food, looking all around at the
people: the colours and pictures on the
walls.

hermitjack drink tea

hermitjack sad hermitjack dark not black
like peter

hermitjack dark brown grey

man shout mcdonald man shout scared.

men shout red round counter make

vicky red scared

redblackpolice run in look for vicky take

vicky back hide vicky hide hermitjack

help vicky

shout shout shout all red all black

close eyes

redblackpolice pull vicky hand

nomorenomorenomore.no

nomore medoban nomore medoban

nomore medobannomore medobannomore

medobannomoremedoban no

moremedobanno medobannomore

nomorenomorenomorenomoreno moreno

morenomorenomorenomore medoban

She's such a mystery. Where's she
come from? What's she doing here?

She looks at me timidly. God she
reminds me of Angela but Angela
would only be twenty now if she were
still alive.

I can hear raised voices. There's some
kind of row going on at the counter and
the next minute two policemen barge
through the doors. Before I know it,
Vicky's under the table clinging to my
good leg.

"What's the matter?" I splutter
through a mouthful of hot tea. I can feel
her shaking down there. I reach down a
hand to pull her up but she digs her nails
into it and I let go quick.

She's muttering over and over, "No
no medoban." At least that's what it
sounds like.

Two girls at the next table are staring
and giggling, otherwise no one seems to
have noticed. They're all too busy

nomedobanno nomorenomorenomore
 noise nomorenoise nomore nomore
 no more noise

baby see vicky baby not red not black
 baby like vicky baby not shout like
 baby

no redblackpolice come no man shout
 hermitjack hide vicky

hermitjack say

redblackpolice gone

get on chair

look no police come no redblack police
 come take vicky.

no redblack police take vicky baby eat
 fries baby cry

medoban

nomore

watching the fun at the counter. After a
 few moments the two coppers
 frogmarch someone out and peace
 returns after some excited whisperings
 among the staff.

The two girls get up and leave,
 giving me curious stares. Their place is
 taken by a young couple with a toddler.
 The little boy crawls under the table and
 says hello to Vicky.

“It’s okay,” I whisper. “They’re
 gone.” I don’t know if she’ll understand
 me. I can see her eyes staring and for a
 moment I remember last night when I
 opened the cupboard, how she scared
 me. She didn’t look at all like Angela
 then. She comes up and sits back on her
 seat, all the time looking round as if
 ready to leap up and run away.

“Did you find it?” I say loudly for
 the benefit of the couple at the next
 table, but they just give Vicky a glance,
 then carry on trying to feed their child.

“They weren’t looking for you. Why would they come for you?”

“Medoban,” she says. She’s shaking so much I can hardly make out the words.

“Medoban?”

“No more, no more, no more...”

“Stop it Vicky,” I say, remembering Rita earlier.

“Stop it stop it stop it...”

She’s got her eyes shut so I stop her hand that’s shaking on the table, put the cup of coke in it and hold on to it till she opens her eyes and calms down.

“Take it easy. No one’s coming for you. Calm down and eat your food.”

She eats but her eyes still dart about like a frightened animal. I drink my tea and try not to think about Angela.

Medoban? What does that mean? It seems to be the first clue to her past.

She must have been in care somewhere, or someone must have looked after her.

no moreno morenomore

stopitstopitstopitstopitstopitstopitstop
stopitstophermitjack
hermitjack no hurt vicky
hold vicky hand hermitjack
hand warm

okay vicky okay
eat cheeseburgerfries fries cold
drink coke coke
bubbles good
hermitjack drink tea hermitjack no
talk hermitjack sad

cheeseburger allgone

one fry two fry threefry

all gone

coke all gone

vicky want go shop

hermitjack vicky go shop smells in shop

flowersmell fruitsmell seasmell

lemonsmell

lipstick pink red purple

brown lipstick smell good

red blue pink purple put on nails

little bottles vicky like little bottles

hermitjack buy pills in box vicky

like little boxes, redbluegreen

cleansmell medicinesmell

ladywhitecoat see vicky

From what I've seen of her so far, I can't see how she could have survived on her own for any length of time. She seems to know about the police and it looks like her previous experiences of them haven't been to her liking.

When she's finished eating we go out into the street and I take her into Boots so I can stock up on co-codamol.

She sniffs at and picks up everything and I have a hard time stopping her from putting things in her pockets. I daren't take my eyes off her for a minute. I get her to the pharmacy counter without her actually pocketing anything. She stuffs the blue rabbit in her coat pocket and runs her fingers over the boxes in the displays in front of the counter while I pay for my tablets. The assistant looks at me, looks at her. Her expression softens. She rummages under the counter.

"Here's a few free samples for your

hermitjack give vicky littlebottlebag
 like littlebottlebagsmell
 littlebottles redbluegreenpink
 ladywhitecoat smile vicky

hermitjackvicky go in big road
 vicky open littlebottles like
 tops on littlebottles pinkbrownblue

pink bottle smell flowers

pink bottle smell bath medoban no like
 medoban

no like pink bottle smell

no like pink bottle

friend.”

The bag is full of little bottles;
 shampoos, shower gels, stuff like that.
 Vicky takes it with a brilliant smile. The
 assistant smiles back.

“Thank you,” I say.

Vicky makes happy grunting sounds
 while she roots in the bag. It keeps her
 occupied while I lead her to the top of
 Lord Street, away from any more big
 shops. My leg is complaining again but
 there’s nowhere to rest. Apart from the
 main street the whole area is a vast
 building site. It’s like the middle’s being
 ripped out of the city. Cranes scrape the
 sky and the air is full of dust.

I think about sitting on a bench at the
 Pier Head, having a nice rest and taking
 in the sea breeze.

The rain is easing off and there are
 glints of blue sky out over the Mersey.
 Gulls shriek from the tops of tall
 buildings and I can smell the river.

police	Suddenly two policemen come out of
	Harrington Street and almost bump into
run vicky run nogomedoban	us. Vicky squeaks, drops her bag of
run	bottles and she's off before I have time
	to think.

The police watch her running, then look suspiciously at me. I daren't chase after her. I walk on slowly, trying to look nonchalant and after a moment or two they carry on and turn down Lord Street towards Church Street.

Vicky's disappeared. I walk all round Derby Square and up and down James Street, looking down all the alleys and in all the shops and bars but there's no sign of her. I call her name and people look at me. I don't care. I just want to find her. I do this for ages but with no luck. In the end I've no choice but to give up. My hip's telling me I have to rest, right now. I limp to the Pierhead and sit down by the ferry terminal and wonder what to do.

I don't want to go back to the house without her. Kindi and Rita expected me to look after her. 'It's not your responsibility,' someone says in my head, but I know it *is* my responsibility - just as it was my responsibility to look after Angela that day. I feel like crying but I can't. My heart and my eyes are dry and have been ever since that day.

It's the quiet time of the afternoon before parents come on the streets with school-kids; before people start rushing home from work. There are still quite a few foreign tourists and pensioner day-trippers milling about. I have to scrutinise the groups of passers-by to make sure she's not among them.

A young Japanese girl suddenly stops and puts a pound coin on the bench beside me. "Cup tea," she says with a shy smile and flits away. Christ, I must look rough.

I don't have to go back to the house. I hadn't intended to stay more than one night, only till the rain cleared. I'd been thinking about leaving Liverpool anyway. I've been here a few weeks now and I don't like to stay anywhere for too long.

I'm kidding myself. I can't leave this unfinished, can't just walk away. She's got Angela's eyes and she knows things about me without having been told anything. How did she know Angela's name? I feel like she can read my mind, but that's crazy, she can't even speak properly. And then there's the way she touched my leg. I think about the shy gaucheness of her; the masturbation; the sex with the Russians. None of the pieces seem to fit together.

And now I've lost her. Anything could happen to her. I have visions of rape, abduction, arrest for shoplifting. I might never see her again, never find out what she knows. Hopelessness translates to stiffness as I creak upright and plod back up James Street.

I've a vague hope that she'll be there when I get back to the house but she isn't. Ray is sitting at the kitchen table alongside an old woman with wild grey hair. There's a bottle of wine that's three quarters empty in front of her.

"Mabel, this is the Hermit," Ray says as I come in through the open back door.

"Oo d'yer say, love?" She peers at me but her eyes are glazed.

I know that place she's in. It's a comfortable hideout, but I don't go there any more.

"Kermit did yer say? Isn't he a frog?"

"Hermit!" Ray shouts down her ear.

"That's a funny name." She looks at me suspiciously for a moment then shrugs and laughs. "Pleased to meet yer, I'm Mrs Mabel Hardaker, formerly of Boaler Street. Ah those were the days when my Jimmy was alive." She swigs from the bottle.

"I've lost Vicky." I watch Ray for signs of anger, disgust. I remember how Corinne's lip curled that day, how her eyes burned into me, after the first cold shock. She couldn't even speak to me, her hatred was so fierce. I remember this, and little else, through the fog of shock and morphine I was wrapped in at the time. I remember feeling detached as the emergency team rushed round me, as if I were watching a film about somebody else. I don't remember any pain, but Corinne's expression is etched on my memory.

"She'll be back." Ray smiles. "Don't worry, she always finds her way back. She's like a homing pigeon."

"There were these policemen."

"Yeah, we know. She runs a mile. Honestly, don't worry. She does it all the time."

"Oo's he lost, love?" Mabel's head swings from me to Ray.

"Vicky. Cupboard Girl." Ray tries to stay her hand on the bottle but she pulls it away and clasps the bottle to her chest.

"Oh, her." She chuckles and looks me up and down. "Don't you worry about her, she'll be havin' it away off down some jigger." She laughs again and raises the bottle to her lips. A trickle of wine escapes and dribbles off her chin to join the other stains on the front of her jumper.

"Rita and Kindi asked me to keep an eye on her."

"Well, what can you do?" Ray shrugs. "She could be anywhere. Where did you lose her?"

"Top of Lord Street. Anything could happen to her."

"She'll come back. She always does."

"But how does she know the way?"

“She’s a blooming homing pigeon.” Mabel laughs and swigs from her bottle. “She’s got ESP or something.”

“What’s it to you?” Ray’s staring at me.

“I just feel responsible.”

“Why? Why should you?”

I shrug. How can I explain? I don’t even know myself why I feel responsible. It’s not for her sake, it’s a selfish curiosity. I want to know how she knows what’s in my mind, if that’s what she does know. Is it some kind of ESP, my guilty secret laid bare? If so, thank God she *can’t* speak. Or is it possible she knows something else, something I don’t know myself?

Mabel sings, “*Come round any old time, make yourself at home.*”

“Shut up Mabel,” Ray says. “She’s always turned up before. If she’s not back by five, we’ll go and look for her.”

“*Put your feet on the mantelshelf, open the cupboard and help yourself.*”

She shakes the bottle. “Got anything to drink?”

“No.” I go out of the kitchen. I don’t like the way Ray is looking at me. He thinks I fancy Vicky but nothing could be further from the truth. I go up the stairs and into the toilet. No one else is around. I think about Vicky earlier, coming out of the Russians’ room. There’s tenderness now when I picture her. I’ve overcome the fright she gave me when I first saw her. It’s not sex. It’s not even because she reminds me of Angela. It’s something in me that responds to the way she moves, the gaucheness. There’s an innocence about her, as if she’s less knowing even than a child, despite her sexualised behaviour. Something in me calls to her, or is it that she is in my mind, calling to me? And she sees Angela, of that I’m sure. Mabel’s singing floats up the stairs;

“Rich or poor, come knock at the door, and make yourself at h-o-o-m-e.”

I go up to the next floor and into ‘our’ room. Maybe she’s sneaked in without anyone seeing her. Maybe she’s hiding in the cupboard right now, holding her breath in the silence, but I know that’s not so. I can sense the emptiness in there.

I open the cupboard door. It’s a nest of brightly coloured knick knacks; scarves, plastic toys, perfume bottles, clothes and shoes all jumbled together on the floor. There’s a mixed smell of perfumes and mustiness. There are a couple of children’s picture books, a few fast food and chocolate wrappers. My gaze stops on an old hardback notebook that looks incongruous amongst all the rest of the stuff.

I pick it up with difficulty. The hardboard covers are worn away at the corners but there’s nothing on them to identify it. I turn it over in my hands and open it then something lands on my back and almost knocks the breath out of me. I stagger forward catching hold of the door post to save myself from falling.

hermitjack in cupboard hermitjack take	“Fucking hell!” I know it’s her before
vicky book	I even turn round because she’s
stopitstopitstopitstopitstopit	screaming, “Stop it, stop it, stop it” and
hermitjack	who else does that?
givevicky	I have to hold on to the door post with
bookgivebookvickygivevickybookgive	one hand while I try to dislodge her with
stopitstopitstopgivebookvicky	the other. After a moment I succeed and
vickybook	she snatches the book out of my hand and
	stops screeching.

hermitjack hurt notleg

vicky hurt hermitjack

not take vicky book not take book

vicky book

hermitjack laugh

vicky cross no laugh

vicky hold book

hermitjack look at book

hermitjack no take vicky book

hermitjack sad no take vicky book

I can hear her panting before I turn around and see her. As well as the blue scarf she's now wearing a pink fluffy hat and sweat is running down the side of her face.

She looks so funny and I'm so pleased to see her unharmed that I can't help laughing till tears come in my eyes while she just stares at me.

She's still panting and her lips quiver. She holds the book tight to her chest and says, "Vicky book." Her eyes flash angrily. I see Angela; at seven, on holiday in Cornwall, throwing a tantrum over an ice cream; at fourteen demanding to be allowed to stay out till after eleven at night.

I sag against the door post. "Vicky book," she says again. "No Hermit Jack."

I wonder what's in the book. Why is she getting so worked up about it? She can't have written in it, can she? I

shouldn't think she'd be able to write, or
even read for that matter. Maybe I'm
wrong.

She clutches it tighter as if she thinks
I'm trying to take it from her but no, let
her keep her secrets. I've got a book like
that too, but mine is in my head.

"Yeah, okay, vicky book," I say.

"Let's go find something to eat."

Chapter Two

It's two days later, late morning. I'm alone in the house, I think, unless Peter's skulking about somewhere. I'm in my room, tucked up in my sleeping bag. My hip's so bad today, I need to rest.

Yesterday I did four hours casual work, washing up on the lunchtime session at the Golden Peacock restaurant in Chinatown. This morning I woke up in agony. After all the pain I went through with the amputation and getting used to the prosthesis, you'd think a touch of arthritis in the hip would be a doddle, but it's no joke. Thank God for co-codamol and hot tea.

I'm beginning to feel warm and cosy and my mind drifts to yesterday, to the good feeling of having enough cash for a few days; me, who used to throw more than that away on a pub lunch with Jed. I wonder how Jed is now, whether he has a new partner in the practice we used to share and if Gladys, our menopausal practice manager has retired yet. The patients stream past, some nameless, faceless; others well remembered from years of chronic illness, both real and imaginary.

There's a rosy nostalgia in these memories as I sink towards sleep then I remember the whisky bottle in my desk drawer and the way Jed started covering up for me, although it was ages before he tackled me directly about it.

It wasn't a problem then, at least I didn't think so.

“You need to face up to things. You’re drinking too much.”

“I can handle it. It’s not affecting my work. Don’t sit in judgement on me, you like a drink yourself.”

“You missed an important meeting last Tuesday, you’ve been late for surgery twice this week and that mouthwash doesn’t fool anybody. People are starting to talk.”

“Talk? People always talk, make mountains out of molehills.” I couldn’t let him see how his words had shaken me. I hadn’t realised anyone knew. And it was only the odd nip, or so it seemed to me then.

“What is it, Buster? The stress of the job? Maybe I can help. Or is it something at home? Is it Corinne?”

Only Jed could get away with quizzing me like that. We’d been friends so long he knew he could talk straight to me and I knew he only had my welfare at heart. That didn’t stop the acid rising in my stomach. I choked on anger and embarrassment. Corinne! There it was. He’d hit me in a tender spot. The acid erupted into my throat as I turned on him and told him to mind his own business before I went in search of a drink.

What did make me drink like that? Now I can see how bad it was, but at the time I didn’t notice it happening. I’d always liked a drink, nothing wrong with that. I didn’t drink cheap stuff, good quality whisky and most doctors need a nip of something after the pressures of a day’s work for the NHS. Changes at work meant bigger workloads, more responsibilities, I was continually tired, but Corinne always wanted more.

She’d got a good job. As a busy lawyer, she had plenty of intellectual stimulation, her own life, friends and colleagues, besides the nice house, beautiful baby girl and reasonably successful husband, but it wasn’t enough. I idolised her but I couldn’t meet her standards. When I couldn’t perform, first at climbing the social ladder and then, as the

drink took hold, not even in bed, that's when the coldness, the contempt, the crushing comments began.

The medical community in a city like Worcester is fairly close knit. I gradually became aware of whispers, sidelong glances from my colleagues, despite Jed's efforts to protect me. Drinking more meant I didn't have to care until the day I got stopped for drink driving.

I'm wide awake now, distress and adrenalin coursing through my body because it's there in front of me; that place surrounded by thorns and briars, like Sleeping Beauty's castle. Angela is inside and I don't want to look, won't look.

This no man's land is for my own protection. Even if I did want to look, nothing comes. I know this because in desperate moments I've tried, over and over, to remember but only bits and pieces come like dreams. I've closed it off so well but after all these precautions, now it seems, I'm given the slip.

Just when I think Angela's sleeping, if not peacefully then at least quietly, I find her echo, haunting me in Vicky; in the turn of her head, the flash of her eyes, and most disturbing of all, in this wordless knowledge she seems to have.

I ought to get out of here, go to a new city, away from this girl/woman who's stirring up old thoughts and feelings, but I can't. I don't know what pulls me to her and it disturbs me. The cosy warm feeling has gone and the sleeping bag feels hot and uncomfortable. My head feels like an upset stomach.

It's strange how she went for me when I looked in the cupboard, the way she clung to that funny old notebook. I'm tempted to get it now and read it while she's out with Kindi and Rita, but I think they have come back. I can hear noises downstairs so I get up and put my leg on. The newly washed sock is soft on my stump. It's the one thing I have to be

really careful about and it's a nightmare trying to wash and dry them. I inspect the socket too and oil the foot.

At least because of my profession, I had a good surgeon and a good prosthetist. It means I can walk a good distance without too much discomfort, or I could until the arthritis kicked in.

Vicky is in the kitchen with Rita and Kindi, sitting round the table eating chips out of a big paper parcel, which is opened in the middle. They look so normal, the distress inside me starts to subside.

"Help yourself," Rita smiles. Her red hair is up in a ponytail today and it looks shiny and clean in the sunlight coming through the open back door.

"We're going to the laundrette this afternoon," Kindi says. "If you've got any washing we'll take it." She looks fresh in a clean white tee shirt and I'm suddenly conscious of my grubby shirt and cords.

"Thanks." I sit down on the only empty chair, tear off a bit of the paper and put a few chips on it. Vicky also looks squeaky clean and her hair looks damp at the ends so I suppose they've all been to the station for a shower.

"Can Vicky stay with you this afternoon? We've got two hours' cleaning at St John's market."

"Fine with me. Okay with you Vicky?"

She doesn't answer, doesn't even look up. She picks up chips, measuring one against another, then stuffing them in her mouth. Rita grabs her sleeve.

"Vicky, you stay with Jack. Me and Kindi go to work."

Vicky stops chewing, looks from Rita to Kindi to me.

"Kindi go to work," she says.

“No Vicky, I go too. Rita go to work. Kindi go to work. “She points to herself and Kindi. “Vicky,” she taps Vicky’s chest. “Vicky stay with Jack.” She points to me. Vicky watches in silence. She eats another chip, looks round again, then smiles.

“Vicky stay Hermit Jack. Rita Kindi go work. Okay.”

“I’ll get my stove. Make us some tea.” I have to hold on to the table to get out of the chair. I need painkillers again.

First thing I do upstairs is to get two co-codamols out of my bag and wash them down with a drink of water. My spare clothes are even dirtier than the ones I have on.

Downstairs, the chips are all gone. Kindi and Rita are stuffing black bin bags with clothes for washing. I hand over my black cords and blue shirt but not my Y fronts or socks. I can wash those out myself with the bit of soap I’ve got in my bag.

“How much?” I say as I get my stove out and set it up on the table.

“Is that all you’ve got?” Kindi looks at the little bundle. “Oh, call it quits. You’ve given us plenty of free tea the last couple of days. Don’t bother with tea for us.” She stops me pouring more water in the pan. “We’re going now. We’ll be back about six. We usually get left over sandwiches and fruit so don’t buy any food. Okay?”

“Okay,” Vicky repeats as they go out of the door.

hermitjack make tea

I watch her while I stir the water on the stove and wait to see if she’ll be the first to speak.

She gets up and washes her hands at the sink but doesn’t say anything. She

fingers sticky
wash hands

wipes her hands on her skirt.

wetbubble
bubble

The water boils. I ponder while I make
the tea. She watches every move, says
nothing. It’s unnerving that she speaks so

cupspooncup

little. I’m realising now that in the four
days I’ve been here I don’t think I’ve

roundandroundspoon

heard her ask a question or start a
conversation, except for screaming, “Stop
it” and “No more”. Even making a simple
reply to a question seems to be difficult.

roundbubbles

sugarsweet

I get some sugar packets out and give
two to Vicky. Suddenly Peter walks in
with a paper cup in his hand. He fills it at
the sink, drinks it down, fills it again.

black

peter

Vicky gets up and goes to the sink.

peter come peter black black

She picks up a plastic spoon. “Peter sad,”
she says and reaches out to touch his arm.

yespeterblack

“Get away from me you fucking

spoon black come out of peter all over

loon.” Peter twists violently away,
spilling water over himself and Vicky.

vicky squash vickysadpetersosad

make peter better

Vicky jumps back and stands there

peter shout

vicky wet

vicky scared

vicky run

petershout make vickyrun

peter redblackangrysad

shout red words
 black words

hermitjack notscared

make vicky notscared

black vicky sick
drink tea

holding the spoon.

“There’s no need for that,” I stir my tea, keeping my voice calm, although I want to flatten him.

“Mind your own business, you old bastard.” He seems to squeeze the words out as if some great force from outside is constricting him.

“Just don’t talk to her like that.” I speak quietly but I can feel my temper rising.

“Fucking shut up, can’t you? I only come in here for a fucking drink and this bitch starts on me, and now you.”

He’s got his back to us and his voice comes out of the hood but I can hear the anger, see it in the way he’s gripping the edges of the sink, both arms rigid.

No one speaks for a few moments. I can hear Peter’s breathing rasping in the silence. Peter’s presence is heavy. It’s as if he knows it. He just stands there.

I empty my cup. I’ve had enough. The

badroom thickblack
 hermitjack vicky go out of house
 leave redsadbblackpeter in badroom

 sun yellowshine
 vicky hot

 vicky see ladygreendress
 nice greendress

 hermitjack walk slow vicky see
 manwithdog dog sniff wall sniff floor
 ladyhighheels tap tap flowers in box on
 wall red flowers blueflowers
 yellowflowers
 whiteflowers
 girlyyellowtop yellowsun
 yellowhair
 girl laugh kiss boy boyredshirt
 laszloredshirt vicky kiss laszlonik
 boygirl go bookshop vicky want go shop

stove is cool enough to pack away.

“Come on Vicky,” I say. She follows me without a word.

It feels about two o'clock. It's warm and
 sunny and the streets are choked with
 women still in summer dresses, shorts
 and tight tops, breasts and navels
 showing; men in tee shirts or looking
 uncomfortable in suits. What's happened
 to the British autumn?

I feel more relaxed walking like this
 with Vicky. It's companionable, even
 though she doesn't speak. The tension
 created by the scene with Peter eases
 away just like the pain in my hip has
 done.

I don't know where to take her. If I
 was on my own I'd go to the library and
 read, but I can't see her sitting still while
 I do that. I think about the museum or art
 gallery but decide against it. In the end I
 take her to St John's Gardens.

vicky want
icecreamchocolate

hermitjack give vicky chocolate
icecream like hermitjack
icecream coldsweetsticky

hermitjack sad...hermitjack no get ice
cream
eat icecream yellowsun behind tree

ice cream good

She tries to pull me into various shops on the way down but I don't let her. I just keep walking and thankfully she follows me.

There's an ice cream van outside St John's market and I stop to buy her one. She points at the picture of the ice cream cone with a flake in it and gives me a smile when the man hands her the cone.

Something twists inside me when I see how her eyes light up. How little it takes to please her.

Going into the garden makes me feel better. It's peaceful here now that the office workers have finished their lunches and gone back to work.

I sit down on a bench and wait for Vicky to sit beside me. She's busy eating her ice cream and I watch her in silence for a few moments.

"You like ice cream, don't you?" She doesn't answer.

“Did you get lots of ice cream when
you were a little girl?”

It’s as if she hasn’t heard me. She
carries on eating.

“Vicky. Haven’t you got any family?”

She looks at me but there’s no
response.

“Mum, dad, brother, sister”

Nothing.

She licks the last of the ice cream
from her fingers and glances at a woman
with a pushchair on the other side of the
garden.

“I have – had - a wife, and a
daughter.”

Nothing. She’s looking at a nearby
rubbish bin. A few wasps hover round it
and she watches them without fear.

“Do you hear me? Do you know what
I’m saying?”

“Bzzz,” she says.

“You remind me of my daughter. Her
name was Angela.”

hermitjack talk ladybabypram go past

hermitjack sad

hermitjack talk sad see bin redpaper

bluepaper angela sweetpaper

crisppaper icecreampaper

wasp in bin no like wasp

wasp go bzzz

yellowblack silvercar yellowblackbzzz

“Angela,” she says and I look up but see no understanding in her eyes. Maybe she’s just repeating what I said.

“My wife’s name is Corinne.” Vicky doesn’t seem to hear me. She’s looking at the roses in their beds, the flower borders along the paths and the wasps buzzing round the bin.

Suddenly it starts to come out. “I wasn’t drunk. They said I wasn’t drunk. Corinne was working late. Corinne was always working late. Angela came home from school. I’d had a drink, but I wasn’t drunk. That’s what they told me, so how?” It stops. I can’t go any further.

“Ow!” says Vicky. I find myself back on the bench in the gardens. I realise I’m holding her hand and squeezing her fingers. I don’t know where I’ve been for the last thirty seconds.

“Sorry,” I let go of Vicky’s hand. I can see she’s ready to run. Her eyes are full of horror. She’s looking at two

hermitjack darksad
grey come out of hermitjack grey come to
vicky angela talk grey
no
grey nono dark
hermitjack hold vickyhand
no
hermitjack hurt vicky
silvercar
vicky hand hurt
nonolikesilvercar
see silvercar
seeangelahermitjack nono
stopithermitjackletgovickyhand
nonostopit
bird birdongrass
bigbird bigredeyebird

silvercar

nonononononononono

redblood

hermitjackangela

nomorestopitstopitstop

black black

blackbadhurt

bad badblood

nomoreangela

nomore sadhermitjack

poorhermitjack

poor hermitjack

pigeons pecking about on the grass.

“What? What is it?” I jump up and look round but can’t see anything.”

“Silver car,” she says and I feel as if a chunk of ice has suddenly formed in my stomach.

“What? What did you say?” She’s looking at the pigeons but when she turns to me it’s as if she doesn’t see me.

“Stop it, stop it,” she wails and I realise I’m shaking her. I let go and slump back on the bench. You can’t see the road from here. There’s no silver car, only the one in the past.

She must see it, she must. Sweat breaks out on my forehead. If she sees it, she knows, she must know what happened.

“What do you see? What? Tell me. Vicky, you have to tell me.”

She bends down and picks up a faded chocolate wrapper from under the bench and begins to fold it this way and that.

hermitjack scared scared vicky

redblack paper smell sweet

redblack hermitjack

redblackangela

redblackpeter

vicky see

stopitstopitstopit peterblack

blackstopitsadblackpeterstopvickygo

nonostopitstopitstop

hermitjack back vickyhermitjack back

peterblackpeternono

stopitstopitstopitstop

run vicky

“Not Hermitjack,” she says. What does she mean? Suddenly she stiffens. There’s something else.

“What is it Vicky? Tell me, please, tell me. Vicky? Vicky?”

It’s as if she’s listening to something. Her eyes are closed and there’s a strange absence about her that makes the hairs stand up on the back of my neck.

She grabs my sleeve and pulls me and starts running out of the garden. I lose my balance and nearly fall.

“Hey!” I shout. “Stop. Vicky stop! What’s the matter?”

“Stop it, stop it, stop it,” she shouts and her eyes are wild with fear. People are staring at us.

“Stop it!” I pull her back to a walk.

“Calm down.”

She slows to a fast walk but she’s still pulling me along and twisting in my grip. She’s muttering under her breath. I so badly need to know what she sees but

run blackblack

run

back

hermitjackrun

house shut open door hermitjack

open door

vicky push door no open

opendoornowopen

stopitstopitstopit

hermitjack open dooropendoornow

she’s obviously so frightened, I need to calm her down before I can get any sense out of her.

She’s got tight hold of my sleeve and she’s walking so fast that I haven’t any breath to speak, all my effort is going in to keeping up with her.

She mustn’t run off and get lost again. I limp along as fast as I can. My hip’s screaming complaints but I’m so unnerved by the wild look in her eyes and the crazy muttering, that I hardly notice it.

People stare as she barges past them, pulling me along with her. By the time we get to Falkner Street we’re practically running again.

The back door is locked.

The key isn’t in its hiding place behind the ivy. Vicky throws herself against the door. It’s not giving.

I’m caught up in her panic, not even wondering why she’s so anxious to get

vicky push door.doornoopennodooropen
pushvicky push push
opendoor hermitjack opendoor

 hermitjack open window.
open door hermitjack open door hermitjack
open door quick hermitjack
hermitjack open door
black in house
black in vicky stopitstopit
 peter peter
peterpeterpeternomoreno
morenomore
see peterfeet peterface
black go out of peter red gone out of peter
nomorepeter

hermitjack hold peterfeet hermitjack
cryshout
vicky hold nomorepeter nomorefoot

back in the house. There’s a loose plank
on the window by the door and it comes
off easily enough. The glass behind the
board is broken. Somebody has done this
before. I put my hand through carefully
and feel about for the door handle. The
key is in the lock on the inside and I
struggle to turn it while Vicky bleats and
fusses behind me.

 The kitchen is empty. Vicky pushes
past me and into the hall and stops short.
At first the dangling feet don’t mean
anything. I look up. Peter hangs from the
landing, swaying slowly in the breeze
from the open back door.

 The rope is an old sheet torn into
strips and tied together. It’s tied to the
banister. I rush forward and try to take
the weight off Peter’s neck by supporting
his legs.
“Get the rope – upstairs – untie it!”
Vicky just stands and stares at me. She
puts a hand on Peter’s left foot. His

	trainers sit neatly side by side on the
nomorepeter shoes on stairs shoes nomore	bottom step.
go peterfeet	She looks at me as if to say it's
	pointless. I'm pretty sure she's right
	judging by the angle of his neck but I
	can't give up so soon.
	"Upstairs," I incline my head, "untie
	the rope. Vicky – please!" She doesn't
	move.
laszlo nik laszlonik shout hermitjack shout	Horror must be in my voice because a
peternomore not speak	door on the landing opens and Laszlo or
	Nik comes out. He chatters something to
nomorepeter fall down fall on hermitjack	the other one and they both rush out and
cry notleg sore	untie the rope.
	Peter's weight lands on me and we
	both fall down. My hip twists and I
poor hermitjack poor peter	scream but ignore it. I feel for signs of
	life but there's nothing.
hermitjack kiss peter push peter chest	He's still warm but I can tell he's been
push breath in out of peter	dead too long for there to be much hope
hermitjack stop no breath come in out of	of resuscitation. Still, I make the effort
nomorepeter	for as long as I can. The pain in my knee
	is terrible when I kneel. The Russians

watch and chatter while Vicky seems frozen.

“Get an ambulance!” I hiss between breaths. Laszlo or Nik takes a mobile phone from his pocket but the other one stops him and says something in Russian.

hermitjack shout

“What are you waiting for?” I can’t get my breath. “Ambulance.”

“No ambulance,” says the other one. “Police come. He is dead anyway.”

vicky scared no want see police police take

I check again for vital signs. Nothing.

vicky medoban

I sit back.

vicky scared

“So fucking what?”

vicky scared police

“Dead,” says Laszlo or Nik. “No need for ambulance.”

ray

Ray comes in from the back, singing to himself. He sees Peter. His face sags and he drops the plastic bag he’s carrying. There’s a sound of breaking glass.

hermitjack kiss nomorepeter

“Get an ambulance,” I hiss and go back to CPR.

ray phone laszlo pull ray

“He is dead,” Laszlo or Nik says

vicky scared

ray cry

sad greysad

ray sad nomorepeter

laszlonik run up stairs

hermitjack sad ray sad vicky sad

touch nomorepeterface hair feel

peternomore peternomoresad

peternomoreblack

redblack paper for nomorepeter

laszlonik go out not talk

hermitjack sad nomorepeter like angela

again. “No fetch police.”

Ray is talking into his mobile. Laszlo or Nik pulls at his sleeve.

“Piss off!” Ray shouts breaking off his conversation. “Clear off out of the way if you’re bothered about the police.” I see he is crying.

He puts the phone back in his pocket and covers his mouth with his hand, watching me. I give up. I’m exhausted. Peter lies there relaxed.

I get to my feet and lean against the banister. I’m defeated.

Vicky moves, kneels down by Peter and touches his face, his hair. She closes his eyes then she takes the folded sweet wrapper out of her pocket and arranges it on Peter’s chest. I half expect him to open his eyes and shout, “Get off me you fucking moron!”

Laszlo and Nik come running downstairs with overflowing backpacks.

They rush past without even looking at

us.

Vicky smooths Peter's hair and
straightens his clothes. "Angela," she
says and looks at me.

I freeze.

"Who's Angela?" says Ray.

I barely hear the ambulance siren. The paramedics are knocking at the front door and Ray has to shout through the letterbox and tell them to go round the back because the front door is nailed shut.

"We came in and found him hanging off the banister. I'm pretty sure he's dead. I've been giving him CPR for about fifteen minutes and there's no sign of life."

Now they've taken over, I realise how exhausted I am. I need to sit down. I turn round but only Ray is there. Vicky has disappeared. Has she gone out the back or up the stairs? My guess is she's headed for the cupboard.

My leg grumbles all the way upstairs. I listen on the landing. Not a sound. Seems that no one else is in.

In our room, the cupboard door stands ajar.

"It's okay, Vicky, it's only me." I open the door. She's not there. The silence is watchful as if someone, Peter maybe, is waiting to see what I do next.

Vicky's belongings are a pathetic heap. The blue fluffy rabbit lies on top. Amongst the jumble of items, the notebook tempts me. Soon the police will arrive. I might be invited to assist with their enquiries. It's time to go. Maybe I'll find Vicky outside in the street.

The notebook goes in my pocket. My bag is downstairs by Peter's body. I tread carefully on the side edges of the stairs to avoid the creaks. The paramedics are still working on Peter, and Ray stands there watching. I get my bag and start to sneak past when one of the paramedics looks up.

“Hey! You! You stay here. You’re a witness.”

I pretend I haven't heard and keep on walking. I want to tell Ray to get the hell out but I daren't look back.

In the yard I breathe out and get a lungful of fresh air. The bright ambulance looks incongruous among the skinny weeds and peeling gates of the alley. I keep to the back streets to avoid the police cars that I expect will be speeding towards the front of the house. Maybe Vicky is round this corner, skulking in that doorway. I search all the alleyways, look in back gardens until I'm exhausted. The streets are empty.

— — —

houseblack streetblack vickysick
ambulancepolice come runvickyhide vicky
no no no housebad streetbad nopeter binshide smellbad man come hide
quick look no look vicky scared man go hermitjack vicky want
hermitjack tell hermitjack vickygo no vicky scared ambulancepolice come
nogomedoban hide here gate garden tree bin silvercar tell hermitjack wait no stay
no run blackbadhousegarden black nomore stay peter gone yes wait wait
hermitjack comeback tree no hurt angela
noise come noise mouse rat vicky scared mouse rat no no stop
it stop it oh no rat cat blackkitty hello kitty

All seems quiet on the way down to Lime Street, too quiet. I can't believe I've escaped so easily. I don't know what to do next, where to look for Vicky. I want to keep searching but I'm done in. I have to rest. Right now my head is rattling. I head for the library. The building swallows me up. The graceful architecture in the Picton Room soothes me instantly. It's like entering a sanctuary. I give myself up to the huge circular room, the muted colours of the leather bound books on the shelves are easy on my eyes.

It's tea time and the library is almost empty. I can hear my own breathing. I sit with the *Daily Post* in front of me and look up at the vast glass dome way above my head. I think of Peter hanging off the landing. Tomorrow the *Daily Post* will carry a few lines on his death. I wonder if any one will know who he was. I admire the way the spiral staircases wend their graceful way up the tiers of books and I see Peter's swinging feet, his empty face as I tried to push the life back into him. I knew he was depressed but I didn't expect him to top himself. He seemed too angry for that.

The pictures unreel. Peter's dead face; Vicky touching him. Was she feeling for herself that he really was dead?

I never saw Angela in the mortuary, never felt for myself the certainty of her death, that cold unresponsiveness. For a long time I didn't believe she was dead. Angela loved me. She was warm and she warmed me; only her touch could warm me in that cold box my life had become. I was always afraid that she would grow away from me, take Corinne's side as she got older. I never thought she might die.

All the time I lay in hospital I kept thinking, if only they'd let me see her, touch her, she would be alive. There was nothing and no one to make her death true for me. I was at home, having my first scotch of the day. Angela was going for her riding lesson, and then

I was in the hospital. It was like a disjointed nightmare with people appearing and disappearing and someone telling me that they couldn't save my leg.

As if that mattered. That time in between, where did it go? Why can't I get it back? Christ knows I've tried.

I come back to the library. My fingers are gripping something hard. It's Vicky's notebook. Vicky looked at Peter, said, 'Angela.' And in the gardens, 'silver car.'

The Jaguar I was so proud of. How could she see it? What did she see? The sleek beauty I brought from the showroom, or the death dealing monster, the mangled wreck it was when I'd finished.

I have to stop this. Tears blur my eyes. The notebook falls open. Its pages whisper in the silence.

In the afternoon we went along the hedges picking blackberries. Michael pulled me down in the grass and kissed me. My blood fired up like the sun and his hands were all over me. Everything in me shouted for him and I forgot all I had been taught. I kissed and touched, I let my hands wander just as he did. I listened only to what I felt and it rushed and roared and ran away with me. There were pain but there were pleasure too so I couldn't stop even though I were scared. It were like when I were little and I used to jump off the top of the brow and roll all the way down to the bottom field. Afterwards, we lay in the grass and I saw rabbits hopping across the field and I wondered if it were like this for them too.

But later in my room, Dad's words came back to me, beware the filthiness of fornication and be sure to deny your mother's blood. I looked at the purple juice fingermarks, the nettle stings on my body, evidence of our

lust. I picked the thorns from my white flesh and felt the desire of the harlot that I've inherited from my mother. There were blood in my knickers. I thought of sacrifice and a warm wet soreness in the middle of me reminded me that I were...¹⁴

"The library closes in five minutes".

I look up at the assistant. The light has changed. Is it six o'clock already? All the other readers have gone. My hip creaks. The assistant shifts her feet. She's anxious to lock up and go home. I put the notebook back in my pocket. All I can see is those lovers in the brambles. Who has written this? Not Vicky, surely? She can barely speak.

Outside the traffic is thinning. The colours are leaving the grass and the flowers in the garden, the same garden I sat in with Vicky just a few hours ago. I stand on the pavement watching the rush hour traffic and try to think where she might have gone.

Maybe Kindi and Rita would know but St John's market is closed now. There are lights in the windows of the Playhouse and neon signs flash against the dimming sky.

I'm dog tired and I need a cup of tea. I want to read the rest of the notebook.

The Sally Army café is still open. It's a different waitress. She looks tired but summons a smile.

"There you go luv, fresh brewed just for you."

"Thanks."

The table furthest from the door is a good choice where I won't be disturbed.

¹⁴ The font Lucida Handwriting 10 will be used throughout the text in representing sections of Mary Appleton's diary.

The hot tea kicks in. I open the book at the beginning. The pages are thin and yellowed. At first there are figures written in thick soft pencil. Some kind of accounts for things sold in dozens. Eggs maybe? The sums are in old pounds shillings and pence, so it must be pre 1972. Looking closer, all the sales are dated in 1964. After this comes the writing, in a thinner pencil and a different hand. The pages are crowded with it, but it's the pothook style of a child, not the kind of writing you'd associate with fluency. The first entry is dated 15th July 1964.

Ted Bracewell brung me back after the funeral. Asked me how I'm going to manage now without Dad. He said, you're on your own now girl. I told him, the Lord will protect me. This afternoon the vicar come but I never asked him in. He stood on the step and asked me how I were going to manage. Hadn't I got no relations? Nosey parker, asking where Mother were. As if I know or care. He said I could count on him and Mrs Swinson for help. Told him I don't need no help. Dad had no time for St Stephen's. Whited sepulchres, he used to call them down there. I walked round the farm when he were gone. This is my farm now, my land. Not milk and honey, like Canaan but mine. I am strong and used to hard work. In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread till thou return to the ground.

I turned to the Bible for advice and my eye were drawn to the family names all written in the front and back. The names go back to 1840, a record of all those who have lived here on this farm. All the pages are filled up, there is no space left for any to come after me. Like Moses and the tablets of stone, God set my hand to find this book, its empty pages waiting for my record. Some things should be written. God will direct me.

Monday 10th August 1964

Today Bill Stanley brung a letter. Now he is postman instead of Reg Wilson. Bill Stanley said Gordon starts work for the post office too in Upholland. Gordon Stanley were one of them as used to laugh at me in school. Bill were hanging round, waiting to see what were in my letter but I come inside and shut the door. This letter is from Ginnigle and Marsh Solicitors in Wigan. Says I must go to Wigan next Tuesday about Dad's estate. Does this mean the farm? I am frickenened by this but excited too. I've never been to Wigan since I were a little girl with Mother. What if I have to leave the farm? I will put my trust in the Lord and take no thought for the future. Ted Bracewell come for eggs. Brung groceries and old newspapers for me to read. The devil tempted me and I turned the pages. People called mods fighting on beaches. Girls with skirts up showing their legs. How could I live like this? Even reading this paper is sinful. I felt Dad watching. I burned the paper. Dug tatties all afternoon.

Tuesday 18th August 1964

Wigan is a sinful place, like Babylon. Ginnigle or Marsh told me Mother could not be found and the estate is left to me. I cannot have the paper till I am twenty-one but I can stay on the farm as there is no one to look after me. There is only the farm. There is no money left after paying the funeral and Ginnigle and Marsh. I remembered the publicans in the temple and held my peace. On the bus back I laughed to myself. Who ever looked after me? I been worked like a horse ever since I were big enough to heft a potato

sack. Kids from the council estate chased after me almost to Ashurst Beacon after I got off the bus. Took Barney for a walk tonight and looked out over the fields to Shevington. It's lonely here without Dad but it's peaceful. Top potato field is almost all dug. I wonder where Mother went.

Saturday 29th August 1964

Gordon Stanley brung a letter today. He's taken over his dad's round already. Bill has a cushy job now, working in the sorting office. I took the letter and turned away but he started talking to me about the new houses that are getting built in Skem and then he tried to kiss me. I pushed him so hard he fell over and Barney chased him all down the path. I watched him get through the gate. He shouted at me, You're fucking crazy Mary Appleton, you always were. His face were bleeding. Don't come here no more I said. I come inside and washed my mouth till the uncleanness were gone. I nailed a box on the gate and wrote POST on it in white paint. The letter were from someone called Inland Revenue. It didn't make sense. I put it on the fire. Ted Bracewell come this afternoon and took six sacks of spuds and eggs as usual. Ted says we will be overrun with Scousers when this new town is finished. He says they will have to build a prison to hold all the criminals. I thought it can't be a more sinful place than Wigan but I held my tongue.

Tuesday 8th September 1964

Today is my eighteenth birthday.

Thursday 11th February 1965

Today have happened a strange thing that makes me so I don't know what to do. I were in Dad's room, looking for one of his jumpers to unravel to knit up again for myself and in back of the draw I found a sock stuffed full of paper money. When I pulled it out, there is more money than I ever saw in my hands, greasy notes, worn with work. This winter have been hard for me on my own, hauling potato sacks, cutting leeks and cabbage. I laughed, then cried, looking at all that money. I put it back in the draw but could not stop thinking about it. I can be like the lilies of the field, neither toiling nor spinning. Then I remember the parable of the two talents so I don't know what to do. I asked Dad to help me but there were no answer. Elsie Bracewell come to bring chicken feed. Ted is sick in bed. I never seen another woman since I went to Wigan last August but she were soon away as there were no one to mind the shop only simple Ellen. Elsie took two stone of cabbage and a stone of leeks. Dad always said they had wagging tongues anyway. In the night I took Barney up to the top of the hill. I knelt down and telled the secret to the earth. Rich, I am rich I telled Barney but a rich man cannot enter into the kingdom of God. I will pray to the Lord to guide me. First egg laid today.

Wednesday 17th March 1965

Spring comes in at last. Ted Bracewell brung red diesel and checked tractor over for me. Set tatties to chit and ploughed bottom field before the rain come. It's hard work but I am my father's daughter. It's all I know. Money would only turn my head from the Lord. This is why Dad kept it out of

sight - to keep us both safe. Ted says Skem is like a building site. Thank the Lord I am up here away from it all.

Friday 24th September 1965.

Behold a stranger comes and I don't know what to make of him. The sun is still strong but the days are shorter and work is easier though there are still potatoes to dig and cabbage to cut. When Ted come, I asked him to bring sugar next week for jam. The blackberries are heavy on the brambles. I watched Ted's van go up the lane and I come back in to count jam jars and check for rubber bands and no sooner had I got out half a dozen jars than Barney set up such a racket and started the chickens all a squawking. In the doorway I could see only the dark forked shape of a man that frickened me half to death till I thought it must be Ted come back for something but when I got out in the light it were a stranger but so beautiful with long fair hair like the Lord Jesus and a shirt all different colours, like Jacob's coat. He asked for a drink of water and his voice were soft and kind so I didn't feel afraid but when I brung the water, he watched me while he drank and I remembered the bad things Dad telled me about men and women and I remembered Gordon Stanley and the boys at school and I begun to feel scared again. But then he talked to me so kind and telled me about places he had been. I asked him where he were going and he said it didn't matter and would I let him stay here tonight. The sun were going and it were getting cold. The path to the lane were already dark under the trees. He had a sleeping bag rolled on his back so I said he could sleep in the old empty chicken shed. I brung Barney inside with me. I can't sleep for

thinking of him out there, although all is quiet. His name is Michael and his beauty and kindness runs against Dad's warning voice in my mind. I have been reading my bible for guidance and the pages I turned tell only of wandering. Israel wandering the deserts, Jesus and his disciples going from town to town. This man wanders too, while I am planted in the ground.

What does this mean? Still, he will be gone tomorrow.

Saturday 25th September 1965

Last night I dreamed of serpents. Michael is still here. He has been helping me with the chickens and with the vegetable garden. The sun seems twice as hot and bright as yesterday. Michael talked to me about the sun and colours and flowers. There are no flowers here. Dad used to say you can't eat flowers. Michael has a little radio - he calls it a tranny. It plays songs about love. Sitting in the sunshine felt good. Michael made me laugh. I laughed more today than I ever laughed before. Tonight is almost cold enough for frost. Michael is sleeping on the sofa in front of the fire. Barney knows him already and doesn't bark. I telled Michael Dad would turn in his grave. Michael said your dad is dead and we are alive. It's true. I feel more alive than I ever did but it makes me restless. Tonight I have not read my bible.

Tuesday 28th September 1965.

Michael has been here four days. The weather holds good. I made him hide in the shed when Ted Bracewell come for the eggs and potatoes. Ted were full of news about the Scousers that are already arriving. Michael came here from Liverpool but he is not from there. All he says is I've been

around. I were weighing the sugar Ted brought for the jam when Michael come behind me and put his arms round me and kissed my neck. It stung me so I dropped the spoon and my breath choked in my throat. You're so beautiful he said but I knew this were not true. My hair is long, uncut, untidy and my clothes are old cutdowns from Dad's things or pieced together from things I grew out of years ago. When I go out children run after me and call me names. Michael got his pack and took out a little mirror and showed me myself. There are no mirrors in this house and all I see of myself is the blurred reflection sometimes in the windows when it is dark. Dad told me I must not look at this for fear of vanity but when Michael showed me I could not help myself. I looked and saw my eyes bright and happy, my lips red, my cheeks flushed. It were true. I am beautiful. It felt good to be beautiful, not wicked like my dad said. In the afternoon we went along the hedges picking blackberries. Michael pulled me down in the grass and kissed me. My blood fired up like the sun and his hands were all over me.

I sit back and lift my cup but it's empty. The café has filled up a bit without me noticing.

"More tea, luv?"

"Thanks."

I wait for the fresh cup and think about the dates in the diary – if that's what it is.

1964. I was six years old. I don't doubt it's that old. The covers are worn and the pages have that brittle texture like weary skin and the smell of old paper.

“Going to be a chilly night.” She puts down my tea and smiles. She’s got me marked for a down and out.

“Yes.” I give her the money. My finger’s already marking the next entry. She shrugs and moves away.

But later in my room, Dad’s words came back to me, beware the filthiness of fornication and be sure to deny your mother’s blood. I looked at the purple juice fingermarks, the nettle stings on my body, evidence of our lust. I picked the thorns from my white flesh and felt the desire of the harlot that I’ve inherited from my mother. There were blood in my knickers. I thought of sacrifice and a warm wet soreness in the middle of me reminded me that I were no longer a separate whole. Michael had changed me. The old Mary were gone forever. How could something so beautiful be evil? I know now that Dad were wrong.

Sunday 3rd October 1965

Everything is stocked up for winter and the sun loses its strength. Life is easy with Michael to help and love makes every job a joy. The farm feels happy. There is no corner of the barns, sheds and house where we have not made love - even in my father’s bed. I wish Dad could have been happy like this. With him I knew only coldness and anger. I thought it were because Mother ran away and I were evil like her, but now I think maybe that is why she ran away, that he drove her away with his coldness. I would run anywhere to share this with Michael. Would I even leave my home?

Monday 11th October 1965.

He is gone and I can't believe it. The house still seems to ring with his laughter. I were feeding the hens this morning when he come out with his pack on his back and said it were time for him to move on. I just stared. I'd not given a thought to a day or time when he wouldn't be there. In my mind we'd go on forever digging tatties and making love. I begged him to stay but he were closed like a stone. I said I'll go with you, even though I were afraid to leave the farm which is all I know. At last I saw that he didn't want me. He said I shouldn't try to tie him down, that both of us were free and that's how we should stay. He kissed me and promised to come back. Can this be true? I will wait here for him. I have nowhere else to go.

Thursday 14th October

His kiss still stings my lips. Everywhere I look, he's not there. Barney will not come to me. He is moping in the barn.

Thursday 28th October

Winter is coming and he has not come back. I think now I will never see him again.

Tuesday 2nd November

I have spent all day on my knees, begging forgiveness of both my heavenly Father and my earthly one. How did I fall into such madness? It must be true, I have my mother's nature, to be tempted and give in so easily. This torment I now suffer is just punishment for my sins.

Sunday 7th November

The Bible comforts me. God can forgive all sins if the sinner repents.

Monday 22nd November

The Devil were in Michael and now is in me. My monthlies didn't show and now this sickness leaves no doubt. What I have suffered so far is nothing to what is to come. What shall I do? There is no one I can tell.

Thursday 10th February 1966

I have prayed and prayed to God to take this evidence of sin away from me but my belly swells daily. Today I felt it move, a horrible flutter. It will not go away. Maybe I will have to go away from here.

Friday 25th February.

Michael has taken most of Dad's money. I thought I might go somewhere else to hide my shame until it is born. I went to the draw to count the money but the sock is much thinner than before. I don't know how much he took. I suppose I should be glad he didn't take it all.

Tuesday March 29th

My belly is huge. The evidence of my sin kicks at me day and night as if it knows how I hate it. It is eager to be free of me. I put on a big coat when Ted Bracewell comes. Last week he said how peaky I look and asked if I were all right. He has taken the last of the potatoes. I been too sick to plant any yet this year. There are plenty of eggs already and I've got my vegetable patch. I pray it will be born dead but I can feel its strength and its anger.

Tuesday April 19th.

Last night I dreamed it were born on the kitchen floor. Instead of feet it had little cloven hooves. What am I to do when it does come? I still can't believe it is really going to happen. God forgive me I have thoughts of drowning it in the kitchen sink. Who would know? But that would be piling sin on sin. Please God, take this cup from me. I will not transgress again.

Sunday June 26th

My belly can get no bigger. I am sure to burst. I left the eggs out in a basket for Ted and called through the window with my list of what I want. I pretended to be busy washing. I have cut up some of Dad's shirts and got out a box to put it in. I spread some of Ted's old newspapers on the bed. What else is there to do? I am frickened now of how to bear it alone but it must be so. I pray we both will not live.

Tuesday June 28th 1966

It came yesterday in the early morning and a horrible squiggling thing it is. I knew it were evil by the way it tore itself out of me. I looked at it and its face were as red as the Devil. Dad were right, sin begets sin.

It screamed while I looked after all the mess and stickiness. I burned the newspapers and everything in the kitchen range. It were still screaming when I come back. Its eyes were fierce and angry and it twisted itself about. It hardly looked human.

I cried all the way through. I were scared of the blood and slime and I were sick and so tired but I knew it were my punishment and even though I were scared being on my own, I were glad Dad weren't here.

I must have fell asleep and when I woke up the afternoon were full of shadows and the room stank of rotting blood and it were still screaming and now its face were purple and it had pissed all over the bedclothes.

Its hair were stuck down black and I got up even though I felt sick and dizzy and took it to the sink and washed it with the dishrag and it stopped for a minute then started up again worse than ever.

I wrapped it up in a towel and put it on my breast and its head bumped about like a blind thing and I squeezed my nipple into its mouth and its gums clamped hard on me and an awful want run through me like when I were with Michael so I knew it were wicked, a memory of my sin and I threw it down on the bed and it screamed and screamed.

There were a terrible pain in my gut and blood run down my legs even though I put a rag there before I got up. I sat down and cried and it screamed and screamed so I couldn't stand it no more and I took it out to the old chicken shed and put it down in the straw. In the other shed the chickens were fussing. Like in a dream I went in and filled the feed hoppers and the water dishes, all the time thinking, maybe God will take it away but in my heart I know that won't happen, because sin is hard to shift. I felt so weak, I struggled to get back to the house then I crawled into the bed and slept.

Wednesday 29th June

This morning when I woke up I thought at first it were a dream. I've had such dreams before, but there were the smell, the stains, the blood, the pain

and the slack in my belly. I made some tea and got some bread and jam. I were so hungry it blotted out the fear of what would be in the shed.

At last I made myself go and I could hear it crying before I got out the back door so I knew it were still alive, but it were a pitiful sort of cry, tired like and soon as I heard it, milk run out of my breasts and all down the front of my nightie. I let the chickens out and threw some feed down in the yard. The sun were shining like it were an ordinary day but all the time I could hear it whimpering. At last I went in and looked in the towel. It stopped crying when I touched the towel and its eyes wandered about like it were searching for me. The towel were soaked with piss and sticky black shit. I didn't want it to see me.

It wanted my breasts but I couldn't stand to feel that shame again. There were an old sack in the corner and I thought about just covering it up and pressing down on it but I couldn't do that either. That would be leading myself into worse sin.

I went back to the house and went through the kitchen cupboards till I found the old beer bottles Dad used to use for feeding motherless lambs. They still had the rubber teats on the ends. I started trying to squeeze milk out of my breasts into a jug but it weren't so easy and I were soon sore and crying. When I thought I had enough I put it in one of the bottles, took the dishrag and went back to the shed.

It were howling, but I hardened my heart. Dad told me evil has many forms. I pushed the teat in its mouth and it screamed and choked, then

must have got a swallow of the milk and it started to suck. I could see its true nature in its greed. It were like a devilish animal.

I didn't touch it. I didn't want to look at it. The smell of it made me feel sick but already I realised what I have to do. I have to feed it and clean it. If I don't that's like murdering it, but if I do these things and it dies anyway, it won't be my fault.

When the milk were gone, I cleaned it with the dishrag as quick as I could, not touching it any more than I had to. It stopped crying but its breath caught in little sobs and when I put the clean sack down, its eyes were rolling asleep. It looked innocent and helpless but I knew different. How could it be? It were a girl. My mam ran off with another man. She were a dirty whore. And look at me.

I must pray for absolution. Perhaps yet it will be taken away. This would be a sign of forgiveness.

I lift my eyes away from the book, away from the nightmare. The café is bright against the darkness outside. The waitress's blonde hair and red lips seem surreal after what I've just read. So does the friendly chatter going on at the other tables.

My rational mind says this must be a work of fiction, but I know it isn't. I've already jumped to the conclusion that the baby is Vicky. The horror of it scalds my brain but I don't doubt it. I have to find her right now, even though I want to read the rest, as if I'm drawn to the madness of it.

My hip's stiff from sitting. As I struggle up Mount Pleasant, I try to comfort myself with phoney explanations. Vicky's found the book somewhere, it's nothing to do with

her. It's some amateur writer's idea for a horror flick, but I'm already cataloguing her speech problems, her shyness, her odd behaviour and the cupboard, oh God, the cupboard.

Everywhere is quiet as I turn into the lower half of Falkner Street. The darkening buildings loom against the still bright sky with a melancholy watchfulness. Suddenly I remember Peter.

"Ma-ake yourse-e-elf at 'o-o-ome." The singing is thin and reedy but echoes down the street and fades away into muttering. Mabel appears round the corner of Catharine Street. She is weighed down on either side by a ballast of bulky carrier bags. My heart sinks.

"Mabel? Where are you going?"

"Oo is it? What do you want?"

"Mabel, it's me, Jack. I was at the house. Remember?"

"The 'ouse?" She laughs, showing a few broken teeth. "It's all locked up, dear."

"Where are the others? Ray? Rita?"

She puts her bags down and rubs her back. "Sure I don't know dear. They're all gone. I packed me bags before the police come. One of them students in the 'ouse next door give me a cup of tea so I waited a bit in case the law pushed off again once they'd took him away. No such luck, though. They locked the place up good and proper."

"Have you seen Vicky?"

"Vicky? Oo's Vicky?"

"Vicky. You know, she was in the house. Cupboard Girl."

"Oh, her."

"I thought she might come back to the house. I need to find her."

“Fancy her, do you dear? Well, there’s no accounting for taste. Anyhow, you won’t be seeing her again. Haven’t got a drink on you, have you, dear?”

“What do you mean? You’ve seen her then?”

“Police took her away. She was hiding in the yard and they caught her.”

“In the yard?” She must have come back. Maybe she was looking for me. “What did you do?”

“What could I do?”

“You could have brought her into that house next door.”

“Not my place is it dear? Anyway, they’d already caught hold of her when I saw her. It was only all the screeching she was doing that made us look and it was too late then.”

“Where did they take her?” I want to shake the information out of her.

“How should I know dear? All I know is, it took four of them to get her into the car.” She bends down and picks up her bags. “Look, I can’t stand talking to you all night. Got to find meself a new little nest.”

“Which police station would they take her to?” I don’t want to get involved with the law but I have to find her.

“Can’t help you there dear. There used to be a cop shop on Church Street but it ain’t there no more. Anyway I must get off.” She pushes past me with a whiff of unwashed body and cheap brandy. “Toodle-oo old bean. Don’t forget, *Co-ome round any old ti-i-me, make yourself at ‘o-o-me.*”

As I cross Catharine Street I can see a patrol car parked outside the house. I stay on the other side of the street till I’ve passed it, then go up the side street to the back but when I look down the alley, I can see crime scene tape across the gate and a uniformed officer on guard outside.

A slim girl with long dark hair comes out of the gate of the student house next door to ours. I move under the streetlight. I don't want to startle her as she comes past.

"Excuse me. I'm from next door – the squat." She looks doubtfully at me. "I'm looking for a woman who was there, Vicky. Do you know Vicky?"

"Someone killed himself." She looks up at me.

"I know, but I need to find Vicky. Do you know her?"

"Is she the old one that sings? She was in our house before."

"No." We walk past the patrol car. It's empty but lights shine round the edges of the boarded windows in the house. "Vicky's about forty. She can't talk properly."

"The police took a woman away. They brought her out of the yard. But she could talk. She kept screaming, 'Stop it. Stop it.' She put up a good fight." She smiles at me.

"Sorry I can't help. I haven't seen any of the others."

"It's okay. Do you know where they might have taken her?"

"Try St Anne Street police station. It's the only one I know."

"Thanks." My heart is in my boots. She'll be halfway to some institution by now.

"Have you got somewhere to go tonight?"

"I'll be okay. Thanks for your help."

It's not my problem, she's not my problem. I should just let it go, melt into the shadows, but I can't. I feel sorry for her, I know how scared she is of the police, but that's not the real reason is it? There's the diary business but even that's not it. It's the growing certainty that she sees things I don't. Maybe she can fill in my missing links. I struggle with my own difficulties in going to the police but in the end I make my way to St Anne

Street. It's a long walk and my leg complains but I keep going. When I get there it's much as I expected.

"I'm enquiring about someone – a woman. She was brought in a couple of hours ago from a house in Falkner Street. I heard someone killed himself there. Her name's Vicky."

"Full name?"

"Vicky – I'm not sure. I think it might be Appleton."

"Your name?"

"Phil Williams." Best not to give real names to anyone official. For a second I think of telling him I'm a doctor. I could say I'm Vicky's GP or her psychiatrist. Maybe they'd let me in to see her. Then I look down at my stained trousers and worn out trainers. I look up and see contempt in his eyes.

"Address?" He puts the pen down on the paper. Just another street bum. "Are you related to this person?"

"No. We're just friends. She hasn't got anyone, I don't think." It was a bad idea to come here. Everything I say sounds ridiculous. There's no way they're going to tell me anything.

"Were you at this house in Falkner Street too?" The pen is poised now.

"No. No, I was supposed to meet Vicky in McDonalds and she didn't show so I went up to Falkner Street and someone told me she was here." Does this sound feasible? I don't think so.

"Take a seat and wait."

I sit down on one of a row of linked seats. No one else is here. Another uniform comes and takes the paper from the duty officer.

My stomach grumbles. I haven't eaten all day. The clock on the wall says seven forty. I'm getting really bad vibes about being here. It reminds me of the past.

That night I was arrested for drink driving, I wasn't really drunk, not as drunk as I wanted to be. They didn't understand.

"I've only had a couple." The light hurt my eyes, bright light bouncing off the white painted walls. I wanted to escape but the voices were unrelenting, calm and polite but the contempt was there. You'd think I'd committed a murder.

They put me in a cell. "Till you sober up," they said and then the worst thing happened. Corinne, dressed in her evening gown, came to get me. Jed had come with her, he looked handsome in his bow tie and dinner jacket, a change from the baggy sweats he usually knocked round in outside work. I'd forgotten about the formal dinner we were supposed to attend.

The Jag purred under her hands as she drove us home. She didn't speak and Jed just squirmed in his seat while I told them both how I'd had enough of dinners and boring speeches, of pretending to be committed to my work when my days were filled with mindless paperwork, patients wanting sick notes and disability benefits and cost cutting exercises that had me jumping through hoops.

"I'm sick of being a pet poodle." No one answered me. Jed stared out of the car window and Corinne screwed her mouth up into a tight little purse like she hated me, and I couldn't wait to get home for another drink. For a moment I worried about being found out, being in the papers for all my colleagues and patients to see. I knew Corinne would chill me to the bone but the whisky took care of my worries. I never gave a thought to what could have happened, what I might have done to someone else. That came later.

"Mr Williams?"

Christ! Have I been asleep?

“Mr Williams, I’m DC Porter. I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“I don’t want to answer any questions. I haven’t done anything wrong. I just want to see Vicky.”

“No one has said you’ve done anything wrong. But we can’t let you see anyone held here. It’s not police procedure. You’re not even a relative. You said so.”

“I’m not going to be interviewed. I don’t know anything.”

“Did you know the deceased?”

“No. I don’t know anything. I met Vicky and we are friends. I’m worried about her. That’s all.”

“Look, we’re not interested in you. We need to trace the family of the deceased, Peter Snelgrove and”-

“Vicky?” I think of the notebook. “I can’t help you.”

“How long have you known her? Does she have any friends, relatives that you know of? Did she say where she came from?”

“I haven’t known her very long.” He looks quizzically at me. What am I doing here? How can I explain about Angela? “I just felt sorry for her.”

“Were you at the house where Peter Snelgrove died?”

“I’m not answering any more questions. Are you going to arrest me?”

“No.” He seems tired. “You’re free to go Mr Williams. I can tell you your friend has been passed to the care of Social Services. Maybe you should try there.”

coldroom policelady say begood

cupboardroom bed vicky scared

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sick vicky scared nomorenomore nonoise no one come room grey

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mo

Chapter Three

I sit in McDonalds for as long as I can with a single cup of tea and a cheeseburger. Money's low and I'll need to find more from somewhere tomorrow. Time's running out now, it's dark. I haven't found Vicky and I need somewhere to sleep.

It's noisy here with crowds of young people but as soon as I open the whispering pages of the notebook, I'm in another world.

Thursday 21st July

It lives on. I should of known it would. It's my punishment and there's no end to it. It's been three weeks now and I'm wore out what with the chickens to see to and the endless milk and bottles and cleaning of it.

I try not to look at it when I go in. It looks so helpless and I have to remind myself that it's easy to love sin, like I loved Michael with his golden hair and the Devil's silver tongue.

I got to be careful even though no one comes here only Ted Bracewell to take the eggs and bring the groceries. I make sure to have the eggs ready. Soon as I hear the van I go down to meet him so he won't hear it cry. He

looks at me suspicious but he don't know nothing. Last week he asked if I weren't hot wearing Dad's overcoat in middle of June. I've wore it right the way through so's he wouldn't notice and I can't take it off yet. I'm still swelled up like a rotten fruit. I just took the groceries and talked about next week's egg order, to remind him to mind his own business. His thoughts are on other things anyway, all he talks about is new Skem and the goings on there.

Last night I went out to the back field when it had finally stopped crying. The night were still with a full moon up. The grass is grown to my waist now without Dad here to cut it. I looked at the cart and the tractor all rusting and disappearing into the grass and thought how they were never going to move again. All I need is the spade and fork to keep the vegetable patch.

Across the plain the new motorway were sparkling and I thought how I've been here on this hill for all my life and always will be. I thought about the new people living down in Skem and wondered how it feels to leave your home for a strange place. At least I have my land. How happy I would be if Michael came back but I don't think he ever will.

When Dad died, I thought for a while that I might go away, maybe to Wigan or even to Liverpool. Maybe I'd have got work in one of the factories, lived in a little room and gone to pubs like the girls in the papers Ted Bracewell gives me. Maybe I'd have married and lived in one of them little houses all stuck together, but maybe I wouldn't like not to be able to walk out and stand alone on the hill, looking down the dark valley at night with only the moon watching. At least here secrets can be kept. Who knows what

*things this land has seen? But change comes - the motorway, this new town.
This makes me fearful. People have had their land, their homes taken away.
Pray God this won't happen here.*

Thursday 8th September 1966

Today I am twenty.

Saturday 24th September

*It is twelve months since Michael came. I watch at the window but the
path is empty. There is silence except for it crying. Even Barney is quiet.*

*It doesn't cry so much now. Maybe it knows it can't soften my heart. It
watches me when I go in but I turn my eyes away.*

Tuesday 11th October

*Today is a year since Michael went away. Not like my sin that is always
with me. Yesterday I seen it catching its toes. Today it tried to lift the bottle
from the sacks I prop it on.*

Wednesday 12th October

Ted come for eggs. I seen him

"Scuse me mate, anyone sitting here?" It takes me a second or two to pull myself back.
I stare at the hulking boy in front of me. He chews gum and looks me up and down.

"No." I wave at the chair. "Help yourself." I turn my body away so he won't talk to me
but he's already talking into his mobile, his tray of food congealing before him.

*I seen him looking at the weeds sprouting through the cobbles in the yard
and at the top field, all fallow and overgrown. You should get out of here*

Mary he said. It's too much for you. I think I see the Devil in him. I must be wary.

Thursday 3rd November

When I took its milk it were trying to roll over. Soon it will begin to move about. I must pray for guidance.

Wednesday 14th December

Now it sits up. It eats bits of egg. I have made it more clothes cut from Dad's things. A harsh winter may yet carry it off. If this happens it is God's will but my life will change again.

Wednesday 21st December

Ted Bracewell bring a Christmas card. From Ted and Elsie it said. Ted asked me to come for Christmas dinner but I told him Christmas is for prayer and meditation, not for vanity and greed. I burned the card on the range when he'd gone.

Wednesday 8th March 1967

First eggs laid this week. It has seemed a long winter but now Spring breaks out. It has survived. Now it eats eggs, potatoes, bread wet with water. Ted come and said I should be planting. He said I should get someone to help. I don't need nothing I telled him but he says it's a waste. Consider the lilies I telled him. This is my land, my business, not yours. Ted Bracewell is like the serpent in the Garden of Eden but I need the groceries he brings for the eggs.

Thursday March 23rd

Found Barney dead on the rug in front of the range this morning. I cried all day. He were a good and faithful servant and has been here almost as long as I can remember. I think Dad fetched him not long after Mother went.

I buried him on the top field under the rowan tree. Poor old dog; he is in a better place now and I am alone.

Saturday 6th May

I've spent all day in the chicken shed. Now it has started crawling about and this morning it were pulling itself up on the door post and trying to walk.

I put in the bit of carpet that Barney used to sleep on and hung up a chicken hopper with water in. It will get no more milk now it has teeth. I shall be glad to dry my breasts. It is mostly quiet except for grunts when I feed it. I don't speak to it but sometimes I forget and shout if it gets in my way when I sweep out the shed. I have nailed a strong bar outside the door. I must make sure it can't get out.

Friday 25th August

A letter come from Ginnigle and Marsh to say I must go to Wigan again to sign the paper for the farm. I had forgotten my birthday were near.

Saturday September 9th

Yesterday I were twenty- one. I caught the bus to Wigan. I took a pound note out of Dad's money to buy myself a birthday present. I were worried about leaving the farm all day but I fed it before I left and made sure the

shed were safely barred. I left the chooks outside. Who would come here anyway? No one except Ted and he only comes on a Wednesday.

I got the paper from Ginnigle and Marsh and whichever one of them it were wished me happy birthday. They wanted me to leave the paper in their safe but I said no. I know these people have evil natures and the paper belongs on the farm. Ginnigle and Marsh sent a letter to something called the Land Registry for me. I signed it but I didn't understand what it said.

I bought a cup of tea afterwards and watched the sinful sights in Wigan. The boys with their long hair and flowery shirts reminded me of Michael so I longed to be back on the farm away from all this visiting of pubs and kissing on the streets. Ted Bracewell telled me that New Skem is a den of iniquity with wife swapping and such going on. Yet I think of my own sin and can't condemn others.

I couldn't think what to buy for my birthday and it seemed a vanity for there is nothing that I need. In the end I bought a new notebook for this one is nearly full. I worried all the way home about the farm and the shed but when I got back everything was just as usual.

Sunday 24th September

I have cut and dried as much grass as I can and saved it all summer. The eggs won't pay for enough straw for the chickens. I thought I might put straw down for it in the other shed but it has Barney's rug and it is easy enough to keep the bare floor scrubbed. It walks sometimes now but it's not much trouble except when it wants food.

Tuesday October 17th

A paper come from the Land Registry. I put it in the draw under Dad's sock where I put the paper for the farm.

Monday 19th February 1968

A stranger come today. I were frickened half to death when he knocked on the front door. I were in the shed seeing to it and I never seen him coming. There is no Barney now to warn me.

He said he were from the Inland Revenue which I don't understand and he said I should be paying tax on what I earn. I telled him I don't earn nothing but he wanted to look all around. I showed him the house and the fields all left fallow. I showed him Dad's machinery all rusting away. And how do you live then? he said and I telled him how Ted brings me flour and butter and such for the eggs and I pointed to the chooks in the yard and then I seen I'd left the other shed door unlatched and my heart flew up in my mouth in case he went and looked in there.

The Lord will provide I said and I asked him in the house for a cup of tea while he filled in his big forms. All the time I kept looking at the shed door and praying that it wouldn't make a noise.

He made me sign the form and then he went away. I followed him down the path to make sure he were gone and then I run all the way back up to shut the shed door but it had got out and were creeping about in the yard. What a dreadful deformed thing it were when I saw it in the day light with its eyes screwed up against God's good sunshine. It looked just how I imagined the devils to look that Dad used to tell me about when I were

little. I got the yardbrush and shouted at it till it went grunting back in the shed. It is strange how some bad things show their evil natures on the outside by their ugliness and others are all beauty and sweet words on the outside yet filled with filth like Michael and that tax collector that come today. It must be the Lord's way of making you watchful. And what of me? My sin is neither hidden inside nor shown outside, but is split off from me, yet grows and grows. Even though it is kept apart in the shed, I am bound to it, it is my eternal punishment. Can there ever be an atonement?

Wednesday 28th March.

Ted Bracewell bring me a new cockerel someone had give him. I wrung old Roosty's neck though I had the devil of a job to catch him. He has had his day and precious few new chicks the last year. Ted says he can sell more eggs to the New Skem people. They are used to a lot of shops in Liverpool and there aren't enough here for them. Ted says he can take his van

There it ends. The notebook is full. I flick at the last page angrily. I want more than the wringing of a cockerel's neck. What happened, for Christ's sake?

People around me are laughing, chattering, arguing. Ronald McDonald and the bright colours are a million miles away from the bleak farm life led by Mary. Yet who knows what secrets are hidden behind this normal scene?

She was twenty one in 1967. Today is 24th September. That makes her just turned fifty- nine. What the hell happened to her? One part of me is still trying to say the whole thing is fiction but the horror is too real. I retreat to my own childhood.

In 1967 we lived in a quiet suburb of Worcester. I was ten years old, too young for the swinging sixties but I can remember the ethos of hope, peace and fun. This kid in front of me is stuffing down his big Mac and looking suspiciously round at everyone else, like a dog with a bone. Were we like that in those days or did we really all love each other the way we're told this so many times, in books, and on TV? I can remember my brother Matt, like Michael with long hair and multicoloured tee shirts. I remember our parents' scandalised faces when my sister Penny appeared in bell-bottom jeans with huge fringes.

I can't recall anything about a child found in a shed. The sixties are just a blur of people and events I've learned to think of as groundbreaking - Marilyn Monroe, JFK, the first space walks, England winning the world cup. What's history to me? Just a patchwork woven with my own views of school and family relationships, memories of the Avengers, Ready Steady Go, football, science fiction films, the space race – the everyday world of a ten year old at that time. None of it seems real now, I can't bring back a single vivid memory.

The boy opposite me scrapes his chair back and leaves. He doesn't give me a look. His eyes are glued to his phone. I look at the littered tray he's left on the table and wonder if he had a happy childhood.

The only stories I recall of children locked away from human contact are rehashed accounts, dramatised in histories, novels and plays and one or two cases in medical journals. I can't remember much about them.

"Closing up now mate." The boy wiping the table looks about fourteen. I heave myself to my feet and get my arms in the straps of my pack. It feels twice as heavy as usual and my hip complains. I feel exhausted and depressed. I've nowhere to go and still haven't decided what to do next.

I don't get much sleep. The night is spent mostly tramping about and moving from one doorway to another. Each time I settle I get disturbed and I can't sleep anyway for the images of Mary sweeping at her monster child with the yardbrush. What kind of child would this creature be, if it was rescued, after so long without love or comfort, deprived of stimulation and the opportunity to hear and learn speech? Could such a child become the shy innocent I see in Vicky? I think of her baring her teeth in the cupboard, playing with herself under the table, having it off with the Russians. I think of the warmth and love Angela was bathed in during the good days, when Corinne and I were happy and Angela was a carefree infant. I remember how she grew to give that love back, especially to her daddy. No matter what Corinne or anyone else thinks, I always loved Angela more than anything. I still do.

Morning sees me back at the library as soon as it opens. The only national daily paper on archive is *The Times*. I check all the dates around the end of the diary and for a while after the last entry but find nothing. I beg a sheet of paper from the library assistant and go through the diary again making a list of possible clues.

1. The farm is somewhere near Wigan .
2. Also mentioned – Upholland, Shevington and Skem. Skem is a new town?

Maybe Skelmersdale?

3. Mary's name is Appleton. Is her father's the same?
4. Other names mentioned: Ted and Elsie Bracewell, Bill and Gordon Stanley, Reg Wilson, simple Ellen.
5. St Stephen's is a church somewhere near the farm. The vicar's name is Swinson.

6. There is a place near the farm called Ashurst Beacon.

The list seems promising. The local newspaper archive is on another floor. I don't expect to find a birth announcement, given the circumstances in the diary, but there just might be a record of Mary's father's death.

I check the *Liverpool Daily Post* from a week before the first diary entry. The reports of the day seem odd, from today's viewpoint. Columns are given over to lengthy coverage of divorce decrees. A report of an unlawful abortion performed by a local doctor jostles pictures of Southport's English Rose contest. Ringo's twenty fourth birthday gets more space than ethical questions about Rhodesia. Still, I suppose if you change the names, the conflicts and moral dilemmas are the same as ever.

The death notices produce no results. Most of them seem to be from Wales and Cheshire. The *Echo* is no better. Every edition is full of the exploits of the Beatles and their satellite Merseyside pop stars. Hardly surprising. Saturday 11th July's edition culminates with the headline, "Night of a Thousand Screams," commemorating the Beatles' arrival in town for the northern premiere of *Hard Day's Night*. There are many more death notices in the *Echo* than in the *Post* but they are all from Liverpool families with a sprinkling of Welsh. I give up and return the microfilm lens to the library assistant.

"Not found what you were looking for?" She smiles. My dejection must show.

"I'm trying to trace someone from around Wigan, but I don't even know where these places are."

She looks at my list. "All those places are near Wigan, I think." She finds me a map of West Lancashire. Her finger traces the elongated diamond formed by Skelmersdale, Upholland, Wigan and Shevington. Excitement stirs in me. The M6 motorway cuts

through the middle of the diamond – the new motorway Mary watched from the fields of her farm.

Is the key to Vicky's identity somewhere in this space or am I chasing a fantasy? Maybe I'd be better going to Social Services and trying to find out where they've taken her but it's like the trip to the police station last night; I don't want to go and doubt if they will tell me anything.

The excitement evaporates and I'm suddenly exhausted. I head for the refreshment area to rest for a while with a cup of tea and think what to do next. The little diamond on the map doesn't look that difficult to reach. The best place to start is probably Wigan. I remember going there a long time ago to a medical conference. All I recall is a grim railway station and some Victorian red brick buildings shouting of industrial wealth. For a moment I see myself in my neat suit, carrying my briefcase. I'm standing outside the station and waving down a taxi. In those days I didn't worry how to get from one place to another.

I go back to the helpful assistant in the local history department.

"You can get to Wigan by bus or train, but where exactly are you trying to reach?"

"It's somewhere round Ashurst Beacon, I think."

"That's near Skelmersdale. I think there's a bus goes from the back of St Johns market, or you can get a train to Ormskirk and then I'm sure there'll be a local bus to Skelmersdale."

I'll need to raise some money to get there so I can't go right away. And the Social Services are niggling at me. This hunt for Vicky's history is helping me to find who she is but not where she is. Social Services hold that key.

“Can I see the duty officer please?”

I wait a long time. An unhappy looking young woman with a baby goes in before me.

“Won’t you sit down?” The duty social worker smiles but I know that appraising look.

It’s one I used to wear myself. I explain about Vicky. Should I pretend to be a relative?

No, it won’t wash once she starts asking questions.

“So why are you so concerned?” She doesn’t even write anything down.

“I’m worried about her. She’s my friend.” I don’t tell her we’ve only just met.

“Don’t you think she’s safer off the street?”

“Yes, but I’d like to keep in touch with her.”

“You know I can’t divulge information.” If she’s thinking I’m some kind of old pervert she does a good job of hiding it. “I can’t even confirm that this person is a client of our service.”

“Yes, but”-

She rustles papers. “I can take your details. If this person is in our care, someone will let you know if she wants to have contact with you and if it’s deemed appropriate.” She examines me, draws conclusions. “Is there somewhere I can leave messages? Do you have a phone?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

I get to my feet.

It takes me three days to scrape the fare together. One of the fruit and veg stalls on the market gives me some work carting boxes but it’s only a couple of hours morning and

evening and they pay me buttons. It's heavy work anyway, my leg's screaming after two hours. I couldn't do more if it was offered.

Monday morning and at last I'm travelling. The cheapest way to get to Skelmersdale is by bus and I try to stay awake as it crawls through the traffic in Walton Vale and eventually out to another overspill district called Kirkby. After that it's curious flat countryside, dotted with white farmhouses and covered with huge fields full of sprouts and cabbages.

Skelmersdale is a mass of tall trees that takes my breath away. I'd expected the wide roads, the sixties link housing and concrete bridges, even the roundabouts, but this graceful autumn glory edging the roads and housing estates is something else.

The bus terminates at a glass shopping mall full of the usual chain stores and cake shops. I get tea and toast in one of the cafes and find out from the waitress that there is a library next to the shopping centre. There are people walking around but it's quiet compared with Liverpool.

I wash and brush up in the toilets in the centre, and take my leg off in one of the cubicles to change the sock. I've no spare clothes now and no real prospect of getting any more. I use lots of the liquid soap in the effort to disguise any developing smells.

The library is between a swimming pool and a police station that I pass as quickly as possible. The library building is surprisingly large. Inside it is light and cheerful. The assistant is really helpful.

"I'm looking for newspapers, going back to 1964."

"We've got local ones – Skelmersdale and Ormskirk, but no national ones before 1990."

She sets up the microfilm machine for me while I take off my pack and my coat.

“Can I look at the Skelmersdale papers for July 1964?”

“Oh, they don’t go that far back. There’s only the Ormskirk Advertiser but all the Skelmersdale news is reported in that.”

I skim through the editions for June. This paper contains little national news. Its pages are taken up with sports days, carnivals and flower shows. The financial pages discuss cattle shows and agricultural sales. The only flaw in this cosy rural existence is expressed in the repeated fears of residents about the new town that is taking shape in their midst.

The paper is published once a week. I start serious reading at the 9th July edition. There are only three funerals reported and nine deaths but one of the deceased lived in Ashurst, so I feel I am on the right track. Excitement makes me rush through the pages even though I know I’m clutching at straws. Mary hardly seems the kind of person to have put family notices in the newspaper. The 9th July is probably too early anyway. I flick through accounts of Ormskirk’s annual horse show and the exploits of the cricket team, to get to the next edition.

Here there are five funerals reported. If Mary’s father is going to be in, it will surely be here – but it’s not. I get out the diary and check the date. No, it won’t be in this one. Maybe the 23rd July – it’s not there either. I’m deflated. I roll the film forward, scrutinising the pages right through August but I don’t find a thing.

I slump back in the chair. Maybe I should just accept this as proof that the diary is fiction. I start to rewind the film, then something catches my eye. The notice is small, tucked away at the end of a column devoted to prayers to the Blessed Virgin and reports of lost kittens.

JEAN APPLETON. If anyone knows of the whereabouts of Jean Appleton, nee Wilshaw, wife of William Appleton, formerly of Brow Lane Farm, Scarclough, last heard of in Wigan, please contact Ginnigle and Marsh, solicitors of Market Street, Wigan.¹⁵

Ginnigle and Marsh! I check the diary. It's there! This must be Mary's missing mother. The diary is real. Scarclough! At last, the name of the village where the farm is located.

I'm feverish now. Can't wait to get this reel out and find more. It takes forever. I scan all the reels from '65 to '67 until my eyes are sore but find nothing – no babies rescued from sheds, no mention of any of the other names in the diary. I quiz the assistant about Scarclough.

"It's up by Ashurst Beacon." This means nothing to me, except that Mary mentions it in the diary.

"I'm trying to trace some relatives, name of Appleton. They live – lived on a farm around there."

"Appleton's a very common Lancashire name." She looks at me kindly. "I'll show you the maps. Sometimes the farms are marked."

She takes me to the Ordnance Survey maps. The names don't mean much; Newburgh, Parbold, but St Stephen's leaps out at me.

¹⁵ The font Courier New will be used throughout the manuscript to denote representations of printed materials including newspaper reports and book extracts.

“The road runs from Parbold to Upholland and you can turn off here,” she points a finger, “and come out in Skelmersdale.”

“Brow Lane.” I lean over the map and it’s there, near a public house.

“If you haven’t a car,” she looks at me doubtfully, “you’re best getting the bus to Upholland and walking from there. It’s quite a long way.” She traces the road with her finger.

“Thanks.” I get my bag and coat. There’s a café across the way and the smell of chips tempts me in. While I’m eating I think how the people in the diary have taken on a reality for me that I didn’t feel before. Still, knowing where she came from doesn’t help me to find out where she is now. Time is going by and she could be anywhere. I keep thinking that if I knew where she had been brought up in the first place, it would be easier to find her. Maybe they will take her back to the same place. Maybe she has a family somewhere.

There must be clues, in something she said. After all, I was with her for most of last week. Why was she so afraid of the police? I remember her hiding under the table in McDonalds. “Medoban,” she kept saying. It’s a medical sounding name. I roll the syllables about in my mouth. It sounds like a drug but it can’t be. “No go medoban,” she said. It must be a place.

Back at the library I search the Yellow Pages but can’t find anything under residential homes or hospitals that sound anything like it. It was a long shot anyway. It’s unlikely to be local. People get sent all over the country for specialised treatment.

I feel like setting off for Scarclough right away but it’s already mid-afternoon and it sounds like it’s still an isolated place. I need to think about where I’m going to stay tonight.

Outside, the air is cooling and clouds are gathering over the hills beyond the buildings. There's a bench on a path at the side of the library, near some trees; a place to sit and plan what to do next. Once it was a playground or leisure area but brambles have grown over the seats and railings and there's rubbish everywhere. Behind the railings the remains of a stream disappear into a concrete tunnel after flowing through upturned shopping trolleys and old tyres.

People are walking along a path to my right that leads towards the shopping centre but they don't come down here. I can see why. There are needles and beer cans lying around and the atmosphere is slightly menacing. I was thinking maybe I could sleep down here under the trees, but maybe it's not such a good idea.

"All right there mate?" Three smackheads appear from nowhere. One has a black eye. "Looking for something?" He grins, showing rotten teeth.

"Just taking a rest." I suppose I'm sitting in the middle of the local dealer shop.

"No, you're all right, stay there." He sits down beside me as I move to get up. One of the other two sits on the other side but the third remains standing, flicking glances towards the shops then back at me. He stamps his feet and rubs his hands.

"Not from round here, are you?"

"Just visiting." I'm glad of the people walking around up on the path. At least they're unlikely to have a go at me while it's so busy.

"I'm Robbie. This is Den and Stuie. What's your name mate?"

"Tommy."

"Want a fag, Tommy?" He starts to roll up.

"I don't smoke." I try again to get up but his hand's on my arm. I try to avoid looking at him, at any of them. Their eyes are so deep and dark I might drown in there. One look

and you can see the peaks and troughs that shape their lives. Stuie's making me twitchy. He paces up and down, short nervous steps, obviously looking for somebody. God help their families. At least I've been spared that. Imagine if Angela – but I think maybe I'd even accept that, just to have her here and alive.

"I've got no money." I feel I need to make the point even though they can tell that just by looking at me.

"Got somewhere to stay? What you doing here anyway?"

"I'm looking for a woman." Stuie stops pacing and snickers. "A woman called Vicky." They all look blank. "She lives in Scarclough."

"That's fucking miles away." Robbie giggles. "Too posh for you mate, or for the likes of us. You can stay in our flat for a day or two if you like. There's no place to doss round here."

"Thanks, but I'll be okay." I can imagine what kind of place they live in. Even I can't sleep with my eyes open all night.

"There's the hostel." Stuie stops for a moment, then resumes pacing. "Come on Mouse, you fucker. Where is he? He's always fucking late."

"Yeah, I forgot about them. They might take you in. We'll take you up there in a minute."

A hostel sounds good, just for one night. A proper bed, maybe some hot food, even a bath. It's been a long time since I slept in a bed and this is a new place. I don't know good spots to sleep, like I did in Liverpool. The shopping mall will be closed up at night and down here – well I don't think so.

A lanky boy rides up on a bike.

"Where've you been, Mouse, you twat?" Den suddenly bursts into life.

“Come on, hurry up.” Stuie is almost dancing.

Mouse jerks his head at me. Robbie grins. “It’s okay. He’s just a dosser. We’re taking him up to the hostel.”

They turn their backs in a huddle and I watch a young girl pass along the top path with a baby in a pushchair. She keeps her head averted.

“Okay, come on.” Robbie touches my arm. Mouse is already riding away, towards the shops. “I’ll take you. Stuie and Den, they got business to attend to.”

I creak to my feet and follow him past the police station. “Isn’t it a bit dodgy, outside the cop shop?”

“Never see a fucking copper here.” He spits on the ground.

Where he’s taking me I’ve no idea. I just limp along and we go through a complicated system of footpaths and underpasses all hedged with bushes full of red berries. Now and again we cross wide roads with huge sweeps of grass verges and monster roundabouts. Everywhere tall trees are ripening red and brown, preparing for winter, making a contrast to the grey concrete box houses.

The thought of winter makes me shiver. I spent most of last winter in Manchester. Ended up in Hope hospital three days before Christmas. It was almost worth the beating I’d got off some yobby Mancs, to sleep in a clean bed for once and be spoken to like a human being. Not that they had much time for me and they still put me out the next morning with just the address of a hostel that was already full. That was one of the few times I almost phoned Jed.

As we walk, Robbie rattles on about the flat he shares with his girl Sharon and her two kids, Justine and Ben, as well as with a floating population of other people with nowhere to stay. I learn how Social Services are always poking their noses in and trying

to take the kids away. I hear the stories of people who drift in and out of the flat for a few days and nights here and there and I find out about his mum's arthritis, this last information brought on by him observing my limp, which is getting worse as the day draws to a close.

"How far is it to Scarclough?" Robbie stops in midflow, grins and points ahead. The hill rises above the town. The ground beneath our feet is just beginning to slope upwards as we move towards the incline. A thick nest of flat roofed grey houses cluster on the lower slopes.

"See that?" He points at a stubby needle sticking up on the top of the hill.

"That's Ashurst Beacon. They used to light fires on it to warn people."

"What about?"

"I don't know. Invasion I suppose. That's what they told us at school."

"And Scarclough?"

"Scarclough's there too. Right by it."

My fingers curl round the notebook in my pocket. "You ever go up there?"

"Nah." He looks at me as if I'm crazy. "Nothing up there. And it's miles. Me ma used to take us there for picnics when we were kids. You can see for miles around. We used to think it was great, but that was when we were kids. Not now."

"Here it is." We cross a road into a pedestrianised estate of identical pebbledashed houses with blue front doors. "That one there." He points to the third house on the row. "Just ring the bell. I better get off."

"Thanks, mate." Despite the way he looks and the way he probably lives, he's done me a good turn for no reason at all.

A voice comes out of the intercom when I ring the bell and after I've explained about having nowhere to go, the door opens.

"Up here." There's a woman at the top of the stairs. She's dressed casually in leggings and a sweater but there's nothing casual in the way she looks me over. She's assessed me before I open my mouth and evidently finds me wanting.

"Are you resident in this area?" is the first question she asks as soon as she's got me sitting in her office.

I explain about coming up from Liverpool but I don't say anything about Vicky and going to Scarclough. "I was hoping to stay with my cousin but he doesn't seem to live here any more. It's years since I've seen him."

"Where did your cousin live?" She frowns.

I struggle to remember the names of the streets Robbie brought me through but my mind's a blank. At last something comes.

"Ashurst."

The frown deepens. "This hostel is for people who are made unintentionally homeless and who were living in the area and are therefore eligible for rehousing by the district council."

She looks at her watch. "The council offices will be closing now. Look, I'll give you a bed for the night but that's all, unless tomorrow you can convince the council that you were actually living with this cousin and you can no longer stay there."

I try to hide my delight. One night will suit me fine. I mutter thanks.

"Come on." She takes me across a small landing to a bedroom. The place seems quite small, just an ordinary house, with four or five bedrooms.

"You'll have to share with Terry. He's been here for a while."

Terry's bed is made with military precision and his possessions, hairbrush, razor, small radio, framed photograph of two children, are lined up in a neat row on his bedside table.

"I'll get you some bedding later. Come down to the kitchen first."

The kitchen is large and warm with a communal pine table. People come and go, there are kids running around. A young man with an anxious look says, "Elaine, I n-n-n-need to t-t-t-talk about something."

"Bit later Geoff. Busy right now."

"Got any food?" I shake my head.

"Here." She unlocks a cupboard, gives me two tins of soup and one of Irish stew.

"Help yourself to tea and coffee." She nods at the canisters on the worktop. "You can use the washing machine. I'll give you some soap powder. Don't suppose you've got spare clothes?"

She frogmarches me back up the stairs, unlocks another cupboard and starts pulling things out.

"What size are you?" She doesn't wait for a reply but holds things up against me. I get a baggy pair of sweat pants, a tee shirt and a grey vee neck sweater, black socks and underpants.

"Here's your bedding." She thrusts a duvet and pillows at me. "Bathroom's here." She opens a door. "I'll leave you to it."

When she's marched away I go back to the bedroom and dump everything on the bed. There's a greyish towel and a small bar of soap among the other things. I can't believe my luck.

The bath is the best thing that's happened to me in a long time and I stay there for as long as I can until someone starts banging on the door and a male voice tells me to hurry the fuck up.

Back in the bedroom I take the time to give my prosthesis a thorough clean and hang my freshly washed stump socks on the radiator to dry. My new clothes feel soft and comfortable, except that the underpants are too tight so I leave them off, and the pants are too big but I fix this with a piece of string I have in my pack.

Maybe I could borrow Terry's razor and shave my beard off, but I don't expect he'd take kindly to that and once you start shaving you have to keep on, so I just give it a bit of a trim with the scissors on my penknife. I always had a beard in the old days, but it was short and neat then. An excellent barber was one of the luxuries I allowed myself. I used to think I looked very distinguished. Still, looking in the mirror now, my skin's a bit rough and my eyes a bit red but I don't look too bad.

By the time I've had a cup of tea and eaten my Irish stew, I'm falling asleep. I don't want to sit in the lounge with the other residents watching *Neighbours* and *Big Brother*. This woman with a ponytail has already been asking awkward questions while I've been sitting at the kitchen table but I have to hang around for a bit while my clothes are in the washing machine. Elaine has gone off duty after handing over to a young man called Greg who looks like a social worker.

A man comes in with a toothbrush moustache, a blazer with brass buttons and very shiny shoes. I know right away that this is Terry. He follows me when I go to the room with my armful of clean clothes. While I make up the bed I'm forced to listen to the story about his wife who was a slattern that couldn't keep the house or the kids clean and who had eventually turned him out of his own home.

“She got the police. To me! In my own house! Said I’d beaten her up. It was a tap. No more than a little smack. God knows I was provoked, I can tell you.”

He’s working himself up, arranging and re-arranging his little row of belongings.

“Now she’s sitting pretty in the house – the house I’m paying for,” he jabs his finger at me, “and I end up in here, like some nomark.”

I don’t care. I just want to get in the delicious bed and go to sleep.

“I suppose the same thing happened to you?” He sits on his own bed and waits for me to commiserate.

“No.” I get under the duvet and turn my back.

“Oh well, suit yourself.” The bed creaks as he gets up. “Bloody dosser,” he mutters as he leaves the room.

Now, even though I was falling asleep before, I can’t sleep. It’s too comfortable, feels strange compared with what I’m used to and Terry’s made me think about Corinne, started up the memories again.

Is Corinne sitting pretty? Is she still in the big house out on the edge of town? How empty that house must seem now without Angela knocking a tennis ball against the garage wall or sunbathing at the bottom of the garden. Has Corinne kept Angie’s yellow and white bedroom the same, with her ‘Take That’ posters and her guitar?

I realise I’m holding myself tight round the middle, trying to hold the pain in, stop it exploding out into the room, out into the rest of the world. If only I could be like Terry so that I could never be wrong, would never have to suffer this guilt.

Something wakes me in the middle of the night. I sit up covered in sweat. I don’t know where I am. Is it Vicky, standing beside me in the mouldering bedroom in Falkner Street? My eyes grow accustomed to the dark while I fumble for my pack, looking for

my lighter. I remember where I am, realise it's not Falkner Street and Vicky's not here. I find a switch and light floods the room, shows me Terry's humped shape, his bedding tidy even in his sleep and his shiny shoes sitting neatly beside the bed.

Tuesday morning I leave early before Elaine, the sergeant-major, comes on duty. The woman with the pony tail, whose name is Janice, feeds me tea and toast alongside her kids. I get my stuff together right after they've gone off to school looking like a row of penguins in their uniforms. Greg gives me a card with the hostel phone number on and the address of another hostel on the other side of Wigan.

"Sorry we can't do more for you." He looks at me earnestly over his wire rimmed spectacles. "If you get any joy with the council, come back this afternoon and we'll try to help you."

In the street I meet Terry coming back with a newspaper under his arm and a carton of milk in his hand. In the daylight he is even more pink and shiny.

"You're out early." I can't pass without saying something.

"Some of us have to go to work." He looks down his nose at me and doesn't stop.

It promises to be another fine day. The sun shines through the trees as I follow Greg's directions across the estates to get to the bus station. It's quite a walk but I feel rested.

When I ask for a bus to Scarclough at the bus station, the driver I approach laughs.

"No bus goes there, pal. You'll have to get the Wigan bus, get off at Upholland, the Golden Lion, and walk up the brow."

I check my money. I've still quite a bit left. Enough to last a couple of days, after that I don't know. This area doesn't look the kind of place to find casual work except maybe for farming and I don't feel fit enough for that. There's no point in worrying about it now.

The bus wends its way through more housing estates, wide roads and trees. My spirits are high. If I can find out who Vicky is - give her a name and a history - I've got more chance of finding out where she's gone. But to do this I'll have to contact old friends from a life I've tried to escape.

Thoughts of the past throw gloom over my good mood. Memories crowd in of the different persons I've been; respected and admired, vilified and disgraced, humble and abject. At least now I'm distanced, closed off. Most of the time, only my guilty thoughts can hurt me. I'm none of these people or maybe I'm all of them rolled up into an unrecognisable mixture, like a ball of plasticine made up of different coloured sticks that ends up just a murky brown lump.

"Golden Lion." The driver jerks the bus to a stop and I get out into the real world. It's a crossroads on a hill. The pub is on my left and across the road there's a chip shop and a convenience store. I ask a passing woman the way to Scarclough and she points up the road to my left.

"It's a good walk. Two or three miles." She smiles at me. My heart sinks and my hip twinges in anticipation of the pain I know is coming.

The road climbs sharply and I'm soon feeling the strain. I make myself take it slowly even though excitement's mounting at the thought of finding Vicky's birthplace. There's council housing bordering the left side of the road; one of those solidly built post war estates. The notebook mentioned something. The children! The children from the council estate chased Mary on her way back from Wigan. It's another little confirmation that gives me a buzz and lends fresh energy as I reflect that I'm retracing Mary Appleton's footsteps.

After a long haul the hill flattens out but there's no sign of habitation once I get past the estate, just untended fields that slope sharply on either side. There are fantastic views though. On my left there's a great plain and the silver line on the horizon could be the sea. Skelmersdale is clustered just below. On my right the buildings of a big industrial town clutter the land as far as the eye can see. This must be Wigan.

I pass the odd house but no farms. I'm getting tired and when I come to a pull-in picnic area, I stop to rest. There are a couple of cars parked up and there are people walking dogs in the bushes and on the grass. I check the photocopied map I got from the library. Brow Lane is on the right and still a good way from where I am now. I've already walked at least a mile and the lane is as far again, if not further.

It's a long slog and the landscape gets bleaker. The hilltop is wind-ravaged with crumbling dry-stone walls, long yellow whips of grass and wild gorse bushes. As if in sympathy the earlier sunshine has disappeared, the sky turns grey and darker clouds gather in the distance.

The lane comes upon me suddenly when I have drifted into a plodding motion of one foot in front of the other, ignoring the backdrop of pain. A flush of anticipation turns almost to dread when I look down the turning and see how overgrown trees meet overhead, making a dark tunnel barely wide enough for a single car to pass. Even though rusty ferns colour the verges and the trees themselves are fiery with autumn golds, the leaves drifting to the ground and the bony branches poking through strengthen my sense of foreboding as I pass under the canopy. My footsteps crunch on the metalled road and seem to echo back at me. The hairs on my neck rise, as if there are hidden watchers.

Further down, the trees are cut back, the road bends and widens, houses are dotted here and there, the atmosphere lightens. Occasional cars pass. Steep banks and thick

hedges obscure the view. I want badly to rest again but I keep on for about half a mile until I see a youngish woman weeding the front garden of one of a pair of whitewashed cottages.

“There’s a big dairy farm on the main road,” she says in answer to my question, “but that’s not down here. Go back to the top road and it’s about two miles along on the right.”

“No, it’s here. I’m looking for some friends who used to live there. Definitely Brow Lane. Their name’s Appleton.”

She looks me up and down. “I don’t know any Appletons.” There’s disdain in her voice. “Mind you, I’ve not lived here very long. Try Mrs Thornton next door, she’s been here twenty years. She’ll know if anyone will.”

I’m opening the gate when she says, “There’s an old place up the road. You’ve come past it, but no one lives there. It’s been abandoned God knows how long. No one seems to know who owns it.”

It’s like a jolt of electricity, blocking out the pain in my hip. I close the gate, all thoughts of Mrs Thornton gone.

“Where?” My voice is hoarse.

She looks dubious. “It’s up near the top of the road. Where the bend is, there’s a metal gate, but it’s all overgrown. There’s no one there.”

I can feel her eyes on me as I hurry back the way I came. Adrenalin gives me energy even though it’s now midday and I’m tired and hungry.

It’s not surprising I missed the gate. It’s set back off the road on the bend and it’s overgrown with tall grass, gorse and brambles. Luckily there’s a gap in the hedge by the gate that I can just squeeze through. As soon as I set foot in the deep leafmould on the

path an eerie quiet assails me. Not a bird twitters. The trees on either side soar in fantastic untamed shapes over my head.

The house is to the right, low and ancient, although little is left of it, just some tumbled walls, all overgrown with ivy. The ground beneath feels stony, like there might be a yard beneath it, but it's solid with dead leaves, layers of weeds and soil. On the left, heaps of broken bricks may once have been a barn.

There is nothing to suggest habitation, any sheds have long gone. The house roof has disappeared. Only vaguely does the brickwork retain the shape of a home, suggest that someone once lived here. Nothing to conjure up the picture of Mary making love with Michael, sitting with her diary, feeding her chickens or even her child and yet, there's a sense of watching, no, maybe just of being, a feeling of containment, something dark, unredeemed, like a ghost trace of the poor stunted creature shut up in the shed. My eyes are drawn to this heap of rotten wood, that clump of stones, and like leaves rustling, a voice in my head whispers, "Was it here, was it here, was it here?"

I have to walk away, out to the fields at the end of the path behind the ruins. The wide sweep of the hill behind the house is cleansing and heartening. The grass here is short and turfy. Cars pass along the road at the top, the road I walked along only a little while ago. Already it seems like another world, another time. Out here in the open, life seems normal. Here Ted Bracewell ploughed the ground for Mary's potatoes, as did her father and who knows how many before him?

I turn and make my way through the undergrowth back past the old barn. Other people have trodden through here, forging pathways, but not too recently. Bleached crisp packets and rusty beer cans are mementoes of their presence.

The tangle of blackberry bushes is heavy with fruit, the briars arching down to the ground with its weight. The berries are swollen to bursting... *My blood fired up...his hands...the purple fingermarks...evidence of...desire...the white flesh of the harlot...*

I half expect to see the imprint of their bodies but there is only the wilderness of couch grass and nettles.

The view when I look up stops my breath. A vista of gentle slopes in slubbed mud greens and browns, faint bluish hills forming the distance and superimposed on the natural landscape, the motorway carries its moving dots of traffic.

I need to sit down. There's a huge stone gatepost that's fallen on its side. Everything in me sinks and I can feel tears approaching. My hand in my pocket feels for the notebook. I hold on to its rigid corners. Next to me the remains of a cart are sliding into the ground, unrecognisable shards of wood, grey and paper thin, one iron wheel sticking up, still solid but pitted with rust and half obscured by gorse bushes growing through the spokes.

Suddenly I have to get out of here. I can feel the air closing behind me as I make my way back down the path to the gate. It's damp underfoot. Despite the hot weather, little light or freshness has penetrated here.

A stinging rattle of raindrops hits me as I squeeze through the gap by the gate, borne on a sudden gust of wind that blows yellow leaves round my legs. Out on the road, that overbearing presence lifts although the tunnel of trees on my left still menaces.

I turn the other way and go back to the pair of cottages but now the garden is empty. There's a twitch of lace curtain when I knock at Mrs Thornton's cottage. After a long time the front door opens on a chain to show a slice of face, long and wrinkled with sharp brown eyes.

“I’m sorry to bother you. I’m looking for the people who used to live at the farm up there. Their name was Appleton?”

When I mention the name her face changes from suspicious to curious. She loosens the chain and opens the door wider. She’s long and thin in a black skirt and jumper that are decorated with cat hairs.

“Nobody lives there.” She casts a glance up the road. “Nobody’s lived there – since before I came here.”

“You don’t remember them then?”

“Didn’t say that, did I?” She peers at me. “I remember Bill Appleton all right, and mad Mary too. I were born and bred in Scarclough village. Nobody’s been here for many a year asking after them.” She stares past me, back in time. “Are you some relation?”

“I think so,” I lie. “I looked the family tree up on the internet.”

“Internet?” She sucks her teeth. “Well, if you found so much out, you’ll have found out what happened for all we’ve tried to keep it quiet. I’d thought it were all forgot about.” She shakes her head. “Now you come along. You’re not from the telly, are you, digging up muck from the past?”

“No, no.” I hold out a pleading hand as the gap in the doorway narrows. “I met Vicky once. I just need to get in touch.”

“Vicky?” Her eyes are guarded. “I can’t stand here all day and I don’t want to talk about it although there’re those in the village who will. Try Jimmy Atherton, it were him as found Mary Appleton’s body.” The door shuts in my face.

Coming out of the tunnel of trees into the open aspect at the top of the brow is like leaving a ghost train. I look up gratefully at the sky with its smattering of blue among the

grey clouds and almost get run over by a sports car that races round the bend and disappears before I even register its presence.

The road begins to slope downwards and I pass a pub on my right. It's an old stone building, it must have been there in Mary's time. I'm hungry and thirsty and I'm tempted to go in and buy a sandwich and maybe get more information from the staff but then there's the lure of the whisky bottles behind the bar and God knows I could use a stiff drink. I make myself carry on. The road seems to go on forever but after some time I see an opening up ahead on the right and when I get up close, there's a sign saying 'Ashurst Beacon'.

Suddenly this stone finger is there in front of me, having been hidden by a steep bank at the side of the road. I sit on the stone plinth and make tea. It's such a relief to rest. I get a strange feeling here, a presence but I shrug it away. It's just because I know people have congregated here for centuries. Here fires were lit to warn of invaders, a wordless communication system, carrying those most basic signals, fear and alarm. The countryside rolls out below. It's always been here, despite the antics of civilisation. Buildings sprout on it but they're only temporary. So is this beacon, even though it's so solidly planted.

I'm still tired when I set off again but I'm too impatient to stay any longer. A couple of painkillers have subdued the gremlin in my hip.

St Stephen's church takes me by surprise as I come round a bend. These sloping banks hide everything from view till you're right on top of them. On the left is the lane the librarian pointed out to me that leads back to Skelmersdale and next to the church is a school where small children are being called in from lunchtime play. There's no marker or sign, but this must be Scarclough. Houses roll higgledy-piggledy down the hill and

thankfully there's a small shop cum post office where I buy a sandwich and a fresh bottle of water.

"Do you know a Mr Atherton? Jimmy?" The woman at the till barely flickers.

"The gardener? End house on the terrace – over the road a bit further down. But you won't catch him in now. After getting your garden done up? He's the best round here."

She looks at me with fresh interest.

"Yeah, someone told me about him." It's hardly a lie.

The house is easy to find. There's a sign in the garden. "Atherton Landscapes. Gardens by design." So, he's not your ordinary oddjob gardener. No ordinary terraced house either. These houses are set back in long gardens and Atherton's garden advertises his skills with lines of shaped bushes and the smooth lawn setting off clumps of michaelmas daisies and chrysanthemums.

There's a truck in the driveway and a burly middle-aged man heading purposefully for the driver's door as I turn into the gravel drive.

"Yes?" He looks me up and down.

"Mr Atherton? Jimmy Atherton?"

"What can I do for you?" His face says it all. He thinks I'm a bum but he can't afford to be rude to a possible customer. I might be an eccentric millionaire. "I'm in a bit of a hurry, got to get back to work."

"Mrs Thornton told me to come and see you."

"It'll be a few weeks before I can take on any more work. I'm chasing my tail as it is."

"No. It's about the farm. The Appleton farm."

He stops with one hand on the truck door handle. His whole body is attentively still and his face changes.

“What about it? There’s nobody there.”

“I wanted to find out what happened to Mary.” I take a deep breath. “To her child.”

He leans back against the truck, folds his arms against his chest.

“Why?” I can’t read his expression. “You from the press?” His blue eyes are fierce, searching. This is someone I won’t be able to kid.

“I think I met her – the daughter. Vicky.”

“Oooof!” The breath rushes out of him. His eyes are fixed on me. “That’s not possible.” He hugs his chest.

“I found this.” I hold up the notebook. He takes it, frowning, turns the pages at random. His mouth drops open and he looks at me with horror.

“Where did you get this? From her?” He sags against the truck. “You think it’s all over,” he says slowly. “You think it’s gone, forgotten but it comes back. It keeps coming back.”

“I have to get back to work.” He recovers himself, opens the truck door. I hold my hand out for the book. I know he wants to keep it, wants to read it in private.

“But I need to talk to you. Please, I need to find her again.”

“Find her?” He seems surprised. “I didn’t think she was still alive.” Reluctantly he hands me the book but his eyes follow it as I stow it in my pocket.

“Come back at six o’clock. Maybe we can talk then.”

At last the truck comes back. He sees me as he goes past and gives me a wave. It's been a long afternoon with nothing to do but sit on the bench outside the shop and think about what has happened to Vicky.

"Been here all the time?" he asks as I limp up the drive.

"No point in going away and coming back. I don't know the area."

He looks a bit guilty like he hadn't realised I'd have to hang about all this time.

"Just let me get this in the garage."

He takes me round the back of the house. The back garden is even longer than the front but just as neat. A border collie rushes out and jumps at us when he opens the door.

"Down, Jimbo." He pushes the dog away and it disappears down the bottom of the garden.

"Tea?" He brings me in to a neat pine kitchen and puts the kettle on. "There's been other people here asking about Mary Appleton, lots of them – but no one for a long time now. I thought everyone had forgotten about it. I tell you straight, I got sick of it – TV, newspaper reporters, every so many years, digging it all up. Sometimes it were just plain nosey parkers, read about it somewhere, wanting a cheap thrill. I don't talk to anyone now." He folds his arms and stares at me.

"Mrs Thornton said you would talk to me."

"Listen mate, what's your name?"

"Bob."

"Listen Bob, the only reason I'm talking to you now is because of that book. Do you mind if I have a look at it?"

"Be my guest." I sit quietly with the mug of tea he gives me while he skims through the diary. He reads greedily, whipping over the pages. I look round the room. There's a

woman's touch here, everything is shiny, clean and colour co-ordinated, but it's comfortable for all that. The dog scratches and whines at the back door.

"Let him in, will you?" He doesn't look up. The dog eyes him hopefully, then slopes off to its basket in a corner. Jimmy Atherton finishes reading, sits back, sighs.

"So where did you get this?"

I go through my story while he feeds the dog and fills its water bowl.

"On the streets? I can't believe it. I'd have thought she were dead or in some institution." He shuts the dog in another room. "Funny, I've never really thought about what became of her. I suppose the story stopped for me after they found her. I didn't even know it were a girl for ages. I thought it were a monster, you know?"

What does he mean? Then I remember that first night, the scary eyes and sharp teeth in the cupboard. He notices the way I'm looking at him.

"I were only eight year old. 'Course later on I realised, you know, she were just a child but it didn't stop me thinking she were a monster, not deep down inside. It were that first time I saw her, you know."

He gets up and rinses his mug at the sink, stares out of the kitchen window. "I'll never forget it, never."

I think of the moment they told me Angela was dead. It was a nurse, someone impersonal. I can still see her pinched, white face. She must have drawn the short straw. It's my one clear memory of that day.

"There were stuff in the papers about her, a lot at first but I were too young to make much of it. 'Course there were loads of gossip and people coming from Skem and Wigan to find out more about it. As I got older there were bits on the news and in the papers

every so often about how she were getting on in hospital and such places, but I didn't pay much attention. I were young. I had more interesting things to think about." He shrugs.

"Mrs Thornton said you found her mother's body."

"Aye, well it were before that. We used to go and play up there, you know, commandoes and space wars and stuff in the bushes. She were always a bit odd even before her dad died and she used to chase us and that. We thought it were funny. We used to dare each other. You know how kids are. It were only later I realised how crazy she really were.

"Anyway I were up there one day on my own and I hears something thumping about in the shed and making funny noises. It give me a bit of a fright like.

"In those days I were always making things up about space monsters and stuff – all that Doctor Who on telly I suppose. I were mad on Dan Dare too. I told some of the kids at school there were a monster up at Mary's farm. I told me mam and dad too but they didn't believe me. Me dad never believed anything I said because I were forever making up stories.

"Anyway, top and bottom of it were this kid Norman, he were a bit of a bully and his family were loaded – he thought he were cock of the village – he makes us go back there after school. There were four or five of us I think.

"It were going dark when we got up there. I still have nightmares about it, about going up the path with the bushes all waving like triffids in the shadows and when we got to the top, Norman and the others were all laughing at me and saying there's nothing there when all of a sudden there's this banging and thumping coming from the shed and we were all scared stiff and when it started making these noises, we all ran. You never heard noises like that, they weren't human nor they weren't animal neither.

“I ran with my eyes shut and when I opened them again I were outside the farm door. It’s frozen in my mind. I can still see it now. This horrible face were staring at me. ‘Course it were only poor Mary, but we didn’t stop to look. We all ran away, we ran all the way back to the village.”

He stops and looks at me like he’s coming back from somewhere else.

“That’s some story.”

“That’s only half of it.” He sighs. “Fancy a butty?”

“Thanks. That’d be great.” I’d eaten a pork pie from the shop while I was waiting but that was hours ago.

While he’s buttering bread and getting ham and cheese out of the fridge he tells me how his wife is away visiting their daughter at university. It’s her first year.

I used to plan for Angela’s education. I always thought she’d follow me into the medical profession. Suddenly she’s there, four years old, with a toy stethoscope and medical bag.

“Be good Daddy and you can have a sweetie,” she lisps, pressing the toy syringe against my arm.

“Owww!” I cry and she shrieks with laughter.

My heart squeezes and catches my breath. Jimmy Atherton is holding out a sandwich on a plate and looking curiously at me. Did I cry out? I pull my mind back to Vicky.

“You said that was only half the story?” The fresh tea he gives me washes the dryness out of my mouth. My heartbeat goes back to normal.

“Yeah.” He sits down, takes a bite of his sandwich. “When I got home that night, I tried to tell my dad there were monsters at the farm but he didn’t believe me. My mam could see I were upset but she just told me off for playing up there. Next thing Norman

Forster's dad knocked on the door with Norman. Old Mr Forster were a big nob round here, richest man in the village, so my dad had to take notice of him. We all got in his car and drove up there. Big car it were, a Bentley I think. It were beautiful and any other time I'd have been over the moon to be riding in it but I were too scared to think about it and even Norman didn't have anything to say. My dad still didn't believe me, threatened to leather me if I were telling lies again but when we got there and my dad found the body in the doorway it were different.

"Mr Forster drove up to the pub and called the police and while we were waiting the noises started up in the shed. Dad said it were an animal but he didn't go near it till the police came.

"The body were Mary Appleton. She'd got electrocuted with the hoover or something. Dad kept saying that, but it still looked like a monster to me. Norman kept crying and it made me want to cry too but I managed to bite my lip, then the police came and Mr Forster came and took me and Norman back to the car. He gave me a fifty pence piece. I remember it because it were the first time I ever had one.

"While we were sitting in the car an ambulance and another police car full of plainclothes men came but the farm gate were rusted solid so they had to walk up with the stretcher. First they brought the body down but all you could see were a lump under a blanket, then there were a lot of shouting and banging and the policemen came down with this bundle all wrapped up in blankets and tied round with straps or belts. In the light of the torches we could see this head sticking out and it were the worst thing I ever saw, worse even than Mary Appleton's dead face. This one were alive all right, all hair and teeth and staring eyes like something out of a horror film and the noises it were making were like nothing I ever heard before. It went right through me.

“You couldn’t tell what it were – human or animal, never mind whether it were a boy or a girl. It scared the shit out of all of us. Dad came running behind them and jumped in the car.

“It’s a child,” he shouted and his face was wild, like he couldn’t control it. “Oh God, it’s a child.” This frightened me even more. I suddenly realised that the grownups were just as scared as us kids. I’ll never forget it – never.” He rubs a hand over his eyes.

“I don’t know where it - she - went to. The local hospital at first, I know because my dad kept some of the newspapers. I soon forgot about it on the surface, you know the way kids are, but every so often it pops up in my mind, something triggers it off. Sometimes I’ve wondered if they ever found any family for her. The story goes that they can’t find out who owns the property, that’s why the farm’s been allowed to fall to bits. So I suppose if you think about it logically that means they can’t trace her, but I always supposed she were locked up somewhere. I’ve never thought of her as an ordinary person, only that picture that’s burned into my brain, those awful teeth and that screeching. In my mind she’s always been like that. I were gobsmacked when you said you met her on the street.”

I’m disappointed. I’d hoped he’d be able to give me a clue, a starting point, some way of tracing her.

“Newspapers you said? You haven’t still got them have you?”

“Yeah, matter of fact I have. I found them when Dad died. I’ll get them.”

I’m left sitting in this modern kitchen looking at the gleaming surfaces. The collie comes in and puts its head in my lap. Its eyes plead for me to stroke it. Gingerly I put my hand on the dome of its head. Between my hand and my leg, its warmth connects me to it. It’s a long time since I touched another living creature.

“Here.” He’s back with a scrapbook, one of those cheap sugar paper ones with different coloured pages. “Get down Jimbo.” The collie subsides under the table.

The covers are curled with age. “There’s some later stuff in there too. Every so often some magazine or newspaper digs it all up and runs a feature on it. I got into a habit of collecting it, in case there were anything new, anything that might explain what happened. That were later on, after I grew up and got married and settled down in the late eighties, so there’s a bit of a gap like.”

“And was there? Anything new? Any explanations?”

He shrugs. “Nothing concrete. Experts spouting theories, making comparisons to other cases. Even then I didn’t really think about it, not about understanding it. I just kept the papers for the novelty of it, it were something that related to me, my history, our village.

“But this,” his hand stretches out for the diary. This explains a lot.”

There’s something in his voice that makes me look up. His eyes shift away. There’s something he’s not telling me. Before I can speak, he lowers his eyes to the notebook again, makes a deliberate performance of reading.

I start on the scrapbook. The newspaper cuttings are yellowed. ‘SCARCLOUGH WOMAN FOUND DEAD,’ the first headline shouts. Christ! The date is 13th November 1975. 1975! He looks up at my gasp.

“But Vicky was born in 1966!”

“Yeah. She were around nine year old when they found her, just about the same age as me.” In his eyes I can see the same horror that rocks my brain. What is there to say? I go back to the scrapbook.

SCARCLOUGH WOMAN FOUND DEAD

The body of a woman was discovered at a local farm by two Scarclough men this week. Police were summoned to Brow Lane farm on Ashurst Beacon on Monday 11th November last at 6.30pm following the discovery of a body at the farmhouse. The body is presumed to be that of Mary Appleton who lived on at the farm after the death of her father in 1964. The police are not treating the death as suspicious. A child was removed from the farm and is currently being treated at Ormskirk hospital.

The next clipping is also from the local paper dated Thursday 20th November 1975

BROW LANE FARM CHILD KEPT IN CHICKEN SHED

A child found in a chicken shed last week may have been there for years, police revealed this week. The child was removed from the shed at Brow Lane farm last week following the discovery of a woman's body in the farmhouse. The woman has been identified by local residents as Mary Appleton who lived alone at the farm.

Mrs Appleton's body was discovered by schoolboy Norman Forster, who had gone to the farm with schoolfriends after another boy had reported seeing a monster at the farm. On returning home, Norman told his father, the well known local businessman, Robert Forster.

"My Norman's a sensible lad," Mr Forster told our reporter, "He doesn't make things up so I knew something

serious had happened. I went up to Daniel Atherton's house, his son Jimmy was also involved, and we went up to Brow Lane farm with the boys where we found the body of Mary Appleton and we called the police. It was after the police arrived, we heard noises in one of the sheds and when the police broke the door down, they found a child in there. It had no clothes on and its hair was all matted. You couldn't tell if it was a boy or a girl. It was dreadful. Shocking. I can't describe it."

Police have since confirmed that a female child was found on the premises in an advanced state of neglect and is currently being cared for at Ormskirk hospital until proper arrangements can be made for her. Nursing staff have named her Vicky. It is not known if Mrs Appleton had any relatives.

Two days later it's made the *Daily Mirror*. I wonder what the TV news of the time made of it.

WILD CHILD FOUND ON REMOTE FARM - BOY HERO RESCUES CHICKEN SHED GIRL

A girl of about eight has been discovered locked in a chicken shed on a remote farm in Lancashire. Police say the child was in an advanced state of neglect and may have been in the shed for years.

The child was discovered by schoolboy Norman Forster, who led his pals to the farm, near Scarclough village, after

hearing strange noises when playing in the area on a previous occasion.

On going to the farm after school on Monday 11th November, the boys discovered the body of Mary Appleton, thought to be 29 years old, who lived alone at the farm. The boys ran home and Norman alerted his father, local businessman Robert Forster.

Mr Forster called the police who then discovered the child in the chicken shed while searching the premises. Police say the child, currently being treated at Ormskirk hospital, is probably the daughter of Mrs Appleton. They have so far been unable to trace any relatives of the dead woman. The death of Mrs Appleton is being treated as accidental.

The Sunday Mirror 23rd November 1975

MIRROR EXCLUSIVE- SECRET SHAME OF CHICKEN SHED GIRL

MY SON SAID, "THERE'S A MONSTER IN THE SHED, DAD."

In remote Lancashire the picturesque village of Scarclough has given up a shocking secret, a child hidden in a chicken shed for many years, bereft of comforts, kindness, perhaps even the sound of a human voice.

The child's torment finally came to an end with the discovery of the death of Mary Appleton, presumed to be the child's mother, by local schoolboy Norman Forster and his pals.

It is not known at present how Mrs Appleton died but the circumstances are not thought to be suspicious. Local businessman Robert Forster, Norman's father, told us in an exclusive interview that he went with the boys to the farm where he saw the body of Mrs Appleton lying in the hallway, next to a vacuum cleaner which was plugged into the electric socket.

"Brow Lane farm is hundreds of years old and since her dad died in 1964 I don't think Mary bothered much with its upkeep," he told us. "I could see she was dead. I called the police and it was when they arrived that my Norman said, "There's a monster in the shed."

"When the police broke the shed door down, the thing inside was making a terrible noise, not human - indescribable. When they brought it out, I was shocked. I never saw anything like it in my life. I hope I never see anything like it ever again. It looked about five years old, but nothing like any child you ever saw. I couldn't tell if it was a boy or a girl."

The body of Mrs Appleton was removed to Ormskirk Hospital for post mortem examination. The child has been taken to a secure ward at the same hospital. She appears to be around eight years old but looks smaller. Nurses have named her Victoria. Sister Margaret Owen told us, "The nurse looking after her is called Victoria and we all agreed the name suited the child. Also, of course we hope she will be victorious in overcoming her tragic circumstances. We call her Vicky for

short and we think she responds to the name, but so far she can't repeat it. She can't speak at all."

Vicky will probably be transferred to a specialist hospital when she is physically well enough to begin her rehabilitation into society. We spoke to psychologist Peter Frame who has worked with many neglected children. He said, "This child has suffered appalling neglect. I have heard of such cases before, they are unusual but not as infrequent as we might think. Vicky will probably be unable to walk or speak and will need a long period of physical therapy before even beginning to deal with her emotional and developmental problems."

What can have happened on this farm to produce such a tragedy and how could such a thing happen in a close knit community? How could someone lock up a child for years without anyone knowing of her existence?

Brow Lane farm is set apart from Scarclough village, a traditional rural community which itself is high on Ashurst Beacon, some three miles from the modern new town of Skelmersdale.

"Mary Appleton kept herself to herself," 74 year old Mabel Pearce told us. "Brow Lane farm used to be a happy place when old Jim and Annie Appleton had it, but their son Billy was a different kettle of fish. He was very religious, all hellfire and damnation. He tried to keep his wife Jean the same way but she was a Wigan girl, liked a bit of life. She ran off and left

him when Mary was just a little girl. Mary never left the farm. She did everything her dad said. They were always together and didn't mix with the rest of us. It's just the way things were. When her dad died, Mary stayed on alone. We never thought anything about it."

Ted Bracewell, who keeps the village shop, told us he drove up to the farm once a week with Mary's grocery order.

"I'd collect the eggs she had to sell at the same time. She hardly ever spoke to me, only to say something about her order or the eggs. I never suspected there was a child. She never ordered anything that would make you think a child lived there. I never saw any washing, never heard anything. How could she have had a child? I never saw anyone else up there. She kept herself to herself and if she wanted it like that, that were her own business. We respected that, though a lot of people thought she was a bit mad.

I couldn't believe it when I heard what happened. We were all shocked. You hear of things like this in other countries, where people don't know any better. Not here. Not here. I can't believe it."

There's more but I'm lost in the pictures of Ted Bracewell going up there week after week and never suspecting, despite the strangeness he must have been able to see in Mary. I mean, just look at the way she wrote in the diary, all that religious stuff and letting the farm go to rack and ruin.

A small item in the *Daily Mirror* on Monday 24th November 1975 makes me smile.

CHICKEN SHED HERO'S FOOTBALL JOY

"THAT'S MY BOY", SAYS PROUD DAD

Schoolboy hero Norman Forster, who discovered Vicky the chicken shed girl at Scarclough, Lancashire last week, is to meet the Liverpool football team and be given a grand tour of the Anfield ground. Afterwards Norman will have a special afternoon tea with all his favourite football stars and their manager. Proud dad Robert Forster said, "That's my boy. He deserves it."

"There's not much about you in all this. Norman seems to have got all the kudos."

"That's life, isn't it? Norman's dad were pushy. Taught Norman to be the same. He always got anything that was going, even though he had twice as much as the rest of us and more."

"Do they still live here?"

"No they moved away around 1980, Harrogate I think. Norm's dad were a good businessman, you have to give him that. Went from butcher to manager of a string of retail outlets to owning a few meat packing plants. I never heard from them. They never had any family here. I think they come up from Wigan originally."

He looks down at where his finger marks his place in the diary. It's a clear message. I turn the scrapbook page. The date has moved on.

The Skelmersdale Advertiser Thursday March 25th 1976

INQUEST HELD ON BROW LANE TRAGEDY

Inquiries into the death of a local woman found that faulty electrical equipment caused a tragic accident. The inquest on Mary Appleton, spinster of Brow Lane Farm, Scarclough, was held on Monday March 22nd last at Preston Coroner's court.

Evidence was given by PC Charles Woods of Skelmersdale police station. PC Woods stated that he and PC Graham Ashworth attended Brow Lane farm on Monday 11th November 1975 following a report by a Mr Robert Forster that there was a dead body in the farmhouse.

PC Woods stated that when they arrived they had found Mr Forster, a Mr Daniel Atherton and their sons, at the door of the farmhouse. The body of a woman was lying face up on the floor in the hallway. She was holding an electric plug in one hand which was half inserted into a socket on the wall. A vacuum cleaner lay beside her.

Suspecting electrocution and aware of possible danger to life, PC Woods stated that he asked Mr Forster, Mr Atherton and their sons to move away while he attempted to detach the plug from the socket with a wooden washing prop which he eventually managed to do. PC Ashworth had meanwhile called the police station and summoned the police doctor. Finding the body very cold, PC Woods did not attempt any resuscitation.

At this point, PC Woods stated, a lot of strange noises were heard coming from an old chicken shed in the yard. PC

Woods stated that he looked through holes in the wooden planks of the shed and saw something moving about and crying inside, but he could not recognise what kind of animal it might be. Both police officers then broke down the door and discovered a small child in a neglected condition. It hid in a corner of the shed and attempted to bite them when approached.

PC Woods then stated that the police doctor arrived with Detective Inspector Peter Venables and DC John Morgan from the Skelmersdale police. An ambulance was summoned and the child was eventually overcome and sedated, then removed to Ormskirk hospital.

Police surgeon, Dr Harold Serjeant gave evidence that he examined the body, identified as Mary Appleton, at the farmhouse and concluded that she had died at the scene and had been dead for approximately 30 hours. Death appeared to be due to electrocution.

Detective Inspector Venables of Skelmersdale police station gave evidence that the circumstances suggested accidental electrocution. The farmhouse was in poor condition and the electrical system appeared to date from the 1920s with old cables and sockets in a poor state of repair. The plug to the vacuum cleaner was not earthed and the cable was frayed in several places. There did not appear to be any suspicious circumstances and there was nothing to indicate any suicidal intention despite the tragedy of the child discovered in the shed.

The post mortem report indicated death by electrocution and stated that Mrs Appleton's body was otherwise well nourished and in good health.

Coroner Mr Alistair Forsyth gave a verdict of accidental death by electrocution and commented that the need for regular maintenance of household electric wiring and appliances could not be overstated.

He said, "This is a death that could have easily been avoided. While it is not strictly the concern of this court the only positive thing to come out of this tragic case is the rescue of the child in the shed and its return to a caring society."

We understand that the child, Vicky, is no longer at Ormskirk hospital. She has been transferred to a specialist hospital dealing with disturbed children. Staff at Ormskirk hospital are unable to divulge further details.

"Vicky made excellent physical progress while in our care", Sister Margaret Owens told our reporter, "but the press and public interest have made life very difficult for us all. She will now get the specialist help she needs in a quiet and peaceful environment. Our long term hope is that she may eventually be able to live in a more home like setting."

I come back to where I'm sitting. Jimmy Atherton is still reading with tears in his eyes. His fingers touch the page, almost feeling the words that Mary wrote. There is still garden dirt under his fingernails.

He looks up and shakes his head. "The way we laughed at her. Scary Mary, Mad Mary, even grownups like my dad. This is – is just tormented. I knew she were crazy from things I found out later." He pauses. Again, there's that moment, his eyes turn secretive and he shifts on his chair. There's something he doesn't want to give away.

"She must have been so lonely. Even when her dad were alive he were a nouty beggar, all the kids were scared of him. We wouldn't have dared to play up there while he were alive.

"No one ever found out who the father were. The papers had a field day with their imaginings. You know there were people round here as thought her dad were the father of the child, but when you looked at it the dates just didn't add up. I heard my dad tell my mum it must have been Ted Bracewell as he were the only one who ever went up there. This fills in some of the gaps. Wonder where this Michael went. He sounds like a heartless bastard. If only we'd realised what were happening to her, had a bit of compassion."

"You were only a kid."

"Yeah but now I still feel guilty. And what about the adults? They just left her to get on with it. Poor Mary."

"It doesn't excuse what she did. Poor Vicky."

He looks confused. "I never really thought much about her. She's never really seemed human to me. Mary couldn't help what she did."

We look at each other across the expanse of the nicely polished table, the diary and scrapbook spread out between us. I drop my gaze back to the newspaper cuttings. There are articles from newspapers and magazines scattered over the years from 1988 -1995 but they're just rehashes of the original news items and it's hard to tell if any of the

information is accurate. Just as Jimmy Atherton's account differs from the early reports, so the later articles show discrepancies and there are no concrete clues as to where Vicky ended up. The last cutting is fairly recent, the paper still freshly off white. It's from the *Ormskirk Advertiser* dated Thursday 20th January 2006.

WARD MANAGER RETIRES AFTER 40 YEARS SERVICE.

Staff at Ormskirk District General Hospital this week celebrated the retirement of one of their longest serving nurses.

Sister Margaret Owens, who lives in Aughton, first came to the hospital as a student nurse in 1966. After qualifying as a State Registered Nurse, she went on to specialise in mental health services and soon rose to the rank of Sister.

As a newly appointed ward manager in 1975, one of her first tasks was to supervise the care of an uncivilised child found in a chicken shed, a case which attracted national attention at the time.

Over the years, Sister Owens has seen many changes but commented,

"The team spirit and caring attitude at this hospital has always inspired my work. Ormskirk hospital has been my life. I shall enjoy my retirement but intend to continue working to support the hospital in a voluntary capacity."

There's a jolly picture of uniformed nurses and doctors. Sister Owens is cutting a cake. She looks smart and self assured. This is only a few months ago. It's the only clue I've found in the whole scrapbook. Why has he kept this? Does he know her?

"Margaret Owens?"

He's finished reading the diary and he's been watching me read.

"She were the ward sister, where they took the child."

"Do you know her? Do you know where she lives?"

"No. I only clipped it because it mentions the Appleton case." It's as if he can't bring himself to name Vicky, to invest her with a human personality. "Nothing there of much use to you?" He folds his arms across his chest and doesn't meet my eyes.

"Nothing that will help me to find her but Christ, I'm beginning to understand what happened to her. Why she doesn't talk. It's unbelievable."

"I'm surprised she were let out. Is it safe to let someone like that out on the street?"

"I don't know if she was let out. But anyway, thirty years have gone by. She's not that creature you saw."

"You mean she might have escaped?" He looks alarmed as if he thinks she too might turn up on his doorstep. I can't help smiling.

"I don't know, but she managed to survive on the streets before I met her. People take care of her. There's something about her." I think of the way she touched my leg, how she knew about it, how she knew about Peter, even though she couldn't have.

"She's special." It sounds ludicrous, but I don't owe him any explanation. "Anyway the police picked her up. That's why I'm trying to find her. She needs help."

He looks sceptical. "What's it to you anyway? She got some kind of hold on you?"

"In a way." This makes me smile again. "It's getting dark. I'd better be going."

“Got somewhere to stay tonight? I suppose I could put you up if you like?”

“There’s a place for me in the hostel in Skem.” It’s a lie but I don’t want to stay here.

He’s starting to ask too many questions. Besides I’ve got other plans.

His hand hovers over the diary. “I’d really like to keep this.”

“Sorry.” I palm it quickly. “It’s not mine to give. It belongs to Vicky.”

Now there is guilt on his face when he looks at me.

“Just a minute.” He goes out again and comes back carrying a couple of books. “You can have this. I can get another copy.”

It’s one of those popular books of regional folklore and stranger than fiction accounts with a rather predictable title, *Strange But True Tales Of Lancashire*. The third chapter is titled, “The Curious Tale of the Chicken Shed Girl.”

“Thanks.” I shoulder my pack. The dog runs up and shoves its muzzle in my hand as I open the back door.

“Hold on.” He pushes something into my hand. “You’d better take this. I found it up there a couple of years after it were all over. It were hidden in the lav outside. I never showed it to no one. It belongs with the other one. Come away Jimbo.” He drags the dog off into the other room.

I look down. It’s a cheap exercise book with a red cover, like the ones I used to have as a child. My heart jumps as I open it and see the familiar pothook script.

“Let me know if you find her.” I turn to see his burly shape silhouetted against the open door. I want to stop and thank him properly. I know it’s cost him a lot to part with it. I want to stay and read it right away, but the door closes before I can say anything.

It's almost dark as I climb the slope back up to Ashurst Beacon with my fingers clutched round the book in my pocket as if it might burn a hole through the cloth. I want to stop and read it, but I won't let myself, not until I get to where I'm going.

At the head of the lane, I look down into the tunnel of trees. Maybe this isn't such a good idea but it's something I've set myself to do.

Along the top road, although there were no streetlights, the distant lights of Skelmersdale and Wigan on either side diffused the alien dark of the countryside but in the lane the black is whole, pierced only by the squeaks and scurryings of unseen creatures.

I don't use my torch. My eyes have adjusted during my journey and I need to conserve the batteries for reading later. Still, I stumble up the path once I've got through the gate and just like Jimmy Atherton playing space wars, I keep thinking I can see shapes moving in the bushes. Poor Jimmy, he found out too young there are plenty of real monsters out there. They get inside you and then you can never get them out.

There's no moon but it's a dry night, no dew and not too cold. There's a bit of a breeze but not enough to chill. It would make sense to camp in the shelter of the ruined farmhouse but I can't face the singing of the wind through the holes in the brickwork or the rustlings in the ivy that's transforming the structure. It sounds like so many voices telling their stories, Mary's, Vicky's, Mary's father's and more, many more, older, going back, repeating, re-inventing.

It would make more sense not to be here at all, to trek back down the hill to Skelmersdale and throw myself on the mercy of Elaine or Greg but I feel that by staying here maybe I can feel Vicky, sense something about where she is, reach out for her somehow.

On the edge of the field overlooking the motorway, I spread my groundsheet in front of a hedge of brambles. It's a while since I slept out in the open and the air feels fresh and clean after weeks of urban grime.

I make tea on the primus stove and stare into the blue flames with the age old attraction of fire heightened by the enveloping darkness. Once it kept away wolves, their greedy eyes gleaming in the dense night, but here there are only the squeaks of unseen rabbits and the occasional bat flying overhead.

Only when I'm comfortably wrapped in my sleeping bag do I allow myself to open the red notebook. The torch glimmers eerily on the paper. The writing starts mid sentence, and checking the other one, I see it's a direct continuation.

round the new estates, they are crying out for eggs and vegetables, especially spuds. Ted said it's not too late to plant, Mary and I seen him eyeing up the fields. I held my peace. I'm busy enough as it is, but more eggs will be easy enough, providing this new rooster does his job.

Tuesday 16th July 1968

All is fruitful. I am overrun with produce, even selling some to Ted, peas and beans, even raspberries. There are many new chicks too, there will be plenty of eggs next year. Ted rubs his hands. I see the money twinkle in his eye for he is the slave of Mammon but I am hopeful that this prosperity is a sign. In my heart I think God sees my repentance and my humble acceptance of my lot and thinks of forgiveness. Is it possible that my punishment may come to an end?

Wednesday 24th July 1968

Ted bring papers today. All days are the same here except Wednesdays. Ted spies and watches but I can't live without the things he brings for the eggs. I could spend Dad's money instead but then people would know and come here to spy and steal like Michael.

Sunday 8th September 1968

Today I am twenty-two. Twelve months already since that day in Wigan with its sinful people. Even here now they drive up the top road in cars and come in the fields, fornicating under the hedges and leaving beer bottles everywhere. If only Barney were still here.

I must watch constantly but I am of good cheer. All is well and my garden is still full of vegetables. God begins to turn his face towards me. An angel come to me in a dream and telled me I am to keep guard. Watch, guard, record, so my sin may be erased. Oh, to be free of sin, like the white pages of this book, yet this book come from a sinful place. To be clean seems an impossible thing.

October

It is sick. Should I rejoice? I prayed but the angel would not come. It lies on the floor and leaves food untouched. This morning it would not move no matter how much I shouted or poked it with the brush. In the end I had to touch it though it always makes my flesh crawl to do so. It were alive still, but hot and sweaty. I filled the water hopper and thought whether I should succour it.

I sat in the lav and prayed and at last the angel come and telled me what to do. I went back to the shed and wiped it with a wet cloth. This

seemed a bad thing for it opened its eyes and looked at me and I saw Hell in there. I were frickened and ran away and it were nearly dark before I could go back with the blanket like the angel telled me to. I were still scared but the Lord's will must be done. I moved the water nearer for it to drink and I come back in to the light and the warmth of the fire.

That were all the angel telled me to do. I sat by the fire and thought on why these instructions were given, but it is not for sinful humans to know the Lord's intentions. It is in His hands now.

Wednesday

It has eaten nothing for five days but it drinks the water. Ted were early today and I were still cleaning the shed when he come in the yard but it made no noise so I got out without Ted noticing anything. He frickened me, coming sudden like that. You don't look well, Mary, he says and he looked at me in that spying way of his. Why don't you come down to the village, have a cup of tea with Elsie, see the shop, get Dr Andrews to have a look at you.

I could see the serpent in him and I wanted to drive him away but I can't afford to do that. Don't need no one, I telled him. Just take the eggs and mind your own business. I will have to do something about Ted but first I must wait to see if it will live.

Thursday

It is better. The bread and water I left it were all gone when I went in this morning. Now there is rain, rain and more rain, for two days now like

God is displeased. Can it be that I got the instructions wrong or that the angel is the Devil in disguise?

I am unsettled tonight, my thoughts running loose so I can't rest, and strange feelings, like something I don't understand or don't want to think about but it keeps forcing its way into my mind.

When I thought it might die I were frickened when I should have rejoiced and now there are doubts and fears because there seems a gladness in me that it will live. How can this be? Evil must still be rooted in me when I thought I had cast it off. Thoughts of where it must go, back to Hell from whence it came sent shivers through me as I waited to see what would become of it. I must watch my step or I will share the same fate.

Were it sadness I felt when I thought it would die? And there were fear, the fear of change, of what would happen to me. There would be no need for me to stay or to go. This is wicked thinking, selfishness. I do not know God's purpose in all this. I must follow his will without thought, without reason. God help me, I feel I am drowning. I must pray, I must pray.

Dad come to me in a dream, his eyes full of fire. Repent, Mary, repent your sin. His voice were like thunder and I did repent, I did but he forced my head down on the open Bible and the black letters on the paper burned my eyes, burned themselves onto my eyeballs. I saw the sighting of Canaan by the Chosen Ones, the rejoicing of the wandering Children of Israel. You can never leave here, Dad telled me, listen Mary, and he dug his fingers

into my neck. On the night breeze I heard the sound of it screeching in the shed.

You see, Dad said and I woke up and dawn were breaking but the noise carried on, the sound of the wind howling round the rooftop, only the wind.

Winter

Snow -bitter, bitter snow. Ten days now and the leeks stiff like stone posts in the ground. I live on eggs and potatoes. Ted has not been I think since eight days gone. There is no flour left for bread. I must be careful with wood for the fire. The snow is too deep to gather more. The chickens have mostly kept to their shed, keeping each other warm. In the other shed it seems to take no mind of the cold. The Devil takes no care of fire nor ice.

Dad comes almost every night. I hear his heavy tread on the stair, the whisper of his leather belt, drawn from his waist. In the mornings I am sore from chastisement. In the shed it gloats, gobbling its food, watching, watching while I scrub the filthy mess it makes.

February. Wednesday

I must hide this book. Ted is always spying. I don't know how you stays here Mary, he said today and he's looking all round the yard, peering through the house windows. It's a waste, young woman like you.

I know you, I telled him, I know you of old. I could see the Devil in him like Jesus when he cast out Legion. Get thee hence. I went for the yardbrush and Ted took to his heels but he'll be back. Maybe when I'm not looking, maybe when I'm sleeping. What if my sin should be discovered? It's quiet

now, it's so quiet, only now and then it makes noises to itself. What them noises mean I cannot tell but mostly it is quiet.

Spring

Thank God winter is over. The hens are laying well now. Dad told me to beware of Ted Bracewell. I leave the eggs in a basket by the gate with a list of what I want from the shop. I don't want him nosing around.

There will never be an end. The Bible falls open at Ezekiel. All his righteousness shall not be remembered but for his iniquity that he has committed, he shall die for it. I walked around the fields all grown over and ragged. Today this seems a Godforsaken place.

Will Jesus not save me? Truly I have repented and suffered.

I must put my life in the hands of the Lord. Father, forgive me. Consider the lilies, how they grow, they toil not, they spin not.

And the ravens who neither sow nor reap

I turn the page. It's blank. So are all the rest. Inside the sleeping bag, I'm cold as ice. I can feel her madness all around me; the dark horror of what was done here seeping from the tumbled stones. I want to get up and run back to the normal world of streetlights and traffic and cosy homes. Oh, Vicky, Christ, how did you survive here, trapped with this insane woman? Where are you now?

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There’s no way I’m going to sleep. I turn the stove down low. In the dark I can feel Mary Appleton’s madness creeping through the bushes as if it’s gained its own separate existence. Jimmy was wrong about those triffids, they’re real up here.

I snap the torch on again and try to calm myself by pulling out the other book he gave me and reading “The Curious Tale of the Chicken Shed Girl.”

It’s a short account, highly stylised and geared to titillate. There’s much play on Mary’s immorality contrasted with her religious fervour and a lot of speculation on the identity of Vicky’s father. Mary’s father is prime suspect, ignoring the fact that he died two years before Vicky was born. Although they’re not named, for obvious reasons, Ted Bracewell and Gordon Stanley, the postboy emerge as other possible candidates. It’s as if

their shades are here watching even though they may still be alive, as I read their story. It's frightening to be on the spot where the events took place, where these people walked and talked but it brings me down to earth, away from the insane logic of the later diary entries.

The end of the tale brings new information:

Children like this are always a source of intense interest to scientists who hope to learn more about the links between humans and animals. Vicky spent several years undergoing rehabilitation programmes designed by psychologists, psychiatrists linguists and various educational theorists. From 1975 until 1980 she lived in a specialist centre for grossly deprived children.

Although at first she made good progress and learned to speak and communicate, she never developed the full use of language. In 1980 she was transferred to a residential care home.

The book was written in 2002. It's a small local press, Red Rose publications, based in Penrith. Maybe I'll be able to trace the author, someone called Eric Fisher. This is good. I've two lines to follow up, Eric Fisher and Margaret Owens.

When I turn off the stove, the night folds round me and again I'm aware of another world of life going on round me, layered over the older sensation of evil I get from the land and the crumbled buildings. The farmhouse stands silent behind me but I don't want to look at or think about it. I watch the moving lights on the motorway, the M6 that

connects here to my home town, the place where friends and family live as if on a separate island.

"A specialist centre for grossly deprived children".

I rack my brains but nothing comes to mind. Maybe I'll need to get help to find out more, to spin out a bridge across to that island I cut myself off from so long ago. It's not the first time I've thought about it. Many's the time I've gone into a phone box, stood with the receiver in my hand and my fingers poised over the buttons, but I've never done it.

Even though Jed supported me, covered for me when I was drinking, argued with me, told me the truth and wouldn't let go of me, wouldn't give me up for the useless bastard I was, even though he visited me in hospital, helped Corinne through the funeral, was always there for me and never blamed me once, even though he was my one true friend since we met as students, I didn't trust him enough, didn't trust his belief in me or his friendship.

I didn't even tell him I was going. I just walked away, out of the hospital, the day before I was due to be discharged. I was sitting outside the ward in the sunshine, thinking about how I was going to stay with Penny instead of returning to my own home. Corinne had waited until I was up and walking to tell me she was getting a divorce but it hadn't been a surprise. I couldn't have faced going back to the house anyway.

There were a lot of things I couldn't face. While my injuries were healing, I was pre-occupied with the business of learning to be a patient instead of a doctor; coping with pain and the persistent effort required for recovery and trying to deal with the concept that I was now a different person, bodily and mentally.

But now I was beginning to realise I was expected to pick up the threads of life again, take up my position and carry on. I was terrified. How was I going to go back to the surgery with Jed, face the silences and concerned looks from the staff and patients? It wasn't fair, to me or to them. My world had completely shifted and the courses I followed before now seemed totally irrelevant. There was nothing to go back for. Penny didn't want me. Her cold face told me that she had nothing but contempt for me. She was only offering me a bed out of her sense of duty to the family.

It was easy. I put my stuff in a carrier bag and went. In the taxi, I felt only relief. When the driver asked, "Where to, mate?" it was like a load had lifted off my shoulders.

All those cars going up and down the motorway, even now late at night; people just like I used to be, maybe even people I used to know, friends and colleagues with places to go, people to see. The pinpoints of light swim in the dark.

This time maybe I can face the scorn if it means I can find out what I need to know. I realise now that Jed would never reject me, even if others will. Perhaps, after all this time, I owe him an explanation. But can I make that walk back now?

Corinne is getting ready to go out. The gleam of the stockings on her legs, the arch of her instep in her high heel sandals make me want her. I can't take my eyes off her movements. The dull dark red of her dress softens her skin, the cut of the fabric slides, skimming the shape of her buttocks. Delicious! I could go up behind her, put my arms round her and feel her breasts, have them heavy in my hands. My fingers tingle. I could touch my lips to that spot between her neck and her collarbone. My mouth waters. I'm going to do it, going to get up and go to her.

She turns, her heavy gold hair glinting in the lamplight. It's sleek, shiny like an oiled snake. I want it between my fingers; want to rub it in my face.

A single diamond drop sparkles at her throat, my Christmas present to her the year we were married. It's perfect. I'm lost, locked in love and desire.

"How many have you had?" This harsh voice knocks at my ears. Her mouth is a bloodless line. Her eyes are ice. Instantly, I feel myself shrivel.

"Why do you do this Jack?" It's like hammers, no ice picks, driving in my brain. I put my hands over my ears. "You can't go like this. You'll have to stay here. I'll say you had to work late."

"I'm all right." I get to my feet but the ringing in my ears makes the room wobble. The door slams and there's only the trace of her perfume; the perfume and the musk of her body that she can never quite cover up, that she probably isn't even aware of. Oh Corinne! The Glenfiddich has its own musky scent that soon overrides hers.

The doorbell rings. I'm watching Countdown on TV. Angela's friend Lucy is at the door. She's pert thirteen, breasts and body rounding out but her skeleton still retaining the coltish long bones of a growing child. She's neat in Nike top and track pants with the latest designer trainers. This is uniform but not so the soft dark eyes that are too naïve and trusting.

She's come to visit the stables with Angela. It's their day for grooming the ponies, but Angela's not here. She's already gone.

"I'll take you," I say and she looks at me thankfully.

It's good to be in charge and I love the way the car responds to my commands. My hands are powerful on the wheel. Lucy is small in the passenger seat and then it's dark and I'm in a cold room. It's so cold and the lights are dim. There's something on a table and I don't want to look.

The door opens, the light floods in and I know that shape in the doorway but there's something wrong with it, something terribly wrong. She comes nearer. There's nothing gleaming now. Her hair hangs in rats' tails, the red dress is dull like dried blood, her mouth is dark like dried blood. The diamond is ice at her throat but her eyes are just holes.

"It's all right Corinne." I want to run to her but my feet are nailed to the floor. "It's all right, it's not her. It's not"-

At last I can move, I spring at her, catch her hand, drag her towards the table. "It's Lucy. Look, it's only Lucy. It's not"- then the body sits up and looks at me with Vicky's eyes.

I'm awake, wet with sweat and shivering, all my senses floundering as the vision splinters in front of me, then I feel the cold air on my face, the greasy nylon of the sleeping bag grasped in my clutching hands and the teeth of the zip against my throat.

Relief and sorrow rush in at once but at least wash the horror away. The background filters in. There are noises. In a while I perceive they are sounds of joy; birds, seems like thousands of them, welcoming the grey light that begins to leach the blackness.

The hospital at Ormskirk is a new building, all glass and yellow brick but the older buildings round it testify to its cottage origins.

I've little money left after paying the bus fare here, but there's enough for tea and toast in the hospital canteen and a wash and brush up in the toilets costs nothing.

I can't stop myself glancing at the doctors as they hurry past me in the corridor although it's hardly likely that I would know any of them. The girl at the information desk is smart yet casual. Her smile is impersonal.

"I'm trying to trace a nurse. A Sister Margaret Owens."

The smile wavers. "Sister Owens? Do you know which ward she works on?"

"I don't think she actually works here any more. She retired not long ago. I need to get in touch with her."

"I don't recall anyone of that name." Her fingers move over her keyboard.

A porter stops at the desk. "Fran, do you want anything from the canteen? I'm going on break."

"Owens, Owens, Owens," she's scanning lists, her mouth shapes the names, the sound comes out in a low whisper.

"She worked on the mental health unit."

"Sister Owens? She retired in January." The porter looks at me.

"I know but I need to get in touch with her. Doesn't she live in Aughton?" I'm racking my brains for a plausible reason for contacting her if they ask but he cuts me short.

"Not any more. She died. Had a heart attack two months after she left. Enough to give you goose pimples, isn't it? Happened to my mate just the same. Couldn't wait to retire, took up golf. Bang, two weeks later, had a stroke, dropped dead. Take my advice Fran, carry on working as long as you can."

He turns back to me. "Her daughter works in the coffee shop, voluntary like." He nods towards the hospital entrance. There's a tiny coffee bar tucked to one side. I hadn't noticed it when I came in. "That's her. Rosie Slater. She might be able to help you."

Rosie Slater is dark and slightly gipsyish with a nervous glance. An elastic hairband struggles to contain her luxuriant curls. Her eyes are tired under makeup that is too heavy and old-fashioned.

“Poor Mum.” She pours me a cup of coffee that I can ill afford. “She didn’t get to enjoy her retirement. She had ideas for setting up a self help group for discharged patients from her ward. Did you know her?”

She obviously thinks I’m an ex- patient and a few years ago I certainly could have been.

“She once nursed a friend of mine. Someone I lost touch with. I was hoping she’d be able to help me find her.”

“Oh, she wouldn’t have been able to tell you anything. It’s a matter of patient confidentiality.”

“It was a very long time ago. You might remember her. The girl who was found in a chicken shed at Scarclough.”

She looks bemused for a second, then she recoils slightly and her face wrinkles with disgust. “Oh that. That was years and years ago. I was only a little tot. Of course I heard tell about it over the years but it’s not something you want to think about, is it? Horrible. You say you used to know her, the girl, what was her name?”

“Vicky. Not then, no. I got to know her recently. We were friends, then we lost touch.”

“Oh.” Her face is closing. She looks suspiciously at my clothes, my pack, my face. “She’s still alive then? I never thought – well, I supposed she’d be in a home somewhere.”

“I think she is. I need to find out where.”

“Well my mum wouldn’t have known. That was over twenty years ago. How would that help you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know where to start. I’m just trying anything, anyone who might know anything about her. Maybe she’s been taken back to a place she was at years before.”

“Isn’t that the best thing for her?” She wipes the counter. Her eyes are hard when she looks at me. “I’m sorry I can’t help you. All I remember is some talk about her being moved somewhere down south. It was a few years ago, at least I think it was her.”

The sun is out when I come through the glass doors and it’s unusually hot for late September. I’m starting to sweat under the weight of my pack and my hip is starting to grumble as I make my way towards the shops. It’s getting near to my lunch-time dose of co-codamol.

Ormskirk’s one of those little towns with the standard old church and pedestrianised market area that still pays homage to the original crossroads marketplace. Now it’s a mixture of chain store outlets, charity shops and touristy gift shops and cafes. The kind of place coach tours stop off to while away a couple of hours.

There’s an employment agency but I know it’s hopeless, when I go in, by the way the smart lad at the desk watches me as I limp towards him.

“We’ve only got skilled jobs on offer.” He puts on a friendly face, vaguely regretful. “Office work, data input, qualified IT engineers, that kind of thing. We used to have a lot of farm work, and quite a bit of catering but it’s all contracted out to gangs of Polish workers now. If you’ll excuse me for saying so, you don’t look fit enough to do any physical work. Shouldn’t you be on sick benefit at your age?”

Sick benefit? Do I look that bad? I bet I could beat him any day at anything physical, false leg or no. He's soft as a slug from sitting at that desk all day, but then he's always going to be right. He's got his accepted place in society and I haven't.

I sit on a bench under the town clock eating a pasty and watching a busker outside W. H. Smiths. He's not having much luck either. In the end I stop worrying about money and make my way to the library where I ask the attendant how to find out about the Red Rose Press.

She directs me to the *Writers' Handbook* in the reference section and my heart leaps when I see it's listed there. There's a web address and an email address that I copy down but how am I going to communicate with them when I'm never in one place long enough to receive any messages?

There's another bench outside the library and I sit in the sun and ponder. Even though it's hot and my body's sweating, my inner core feels frozen. All these enquiries seem to come to nothing. I'm no nearer to finding Vicky and now I'm stuck here with no money and no prospects of getting any.

There's an old red phone box near the bench and I keep looking at it, thinking of the lifeline it represents. A lifeline to Jed, not to Matt or Penny, certainly not to Corinne. I think Jed will help me without too many recriminations, but for all I know, he might be in a different practice now, even live in a different place.

How long have I been sitting here dithering? The afternoon shadows are lengthening and I've nowhere else to go. My fingers keep rubbing the fifty pence piece in my pocket. Before I can change my mind I go in the phone box and dial the surgery number. "Please be there, please be there," I'm muttering when the receptionist answers.

"Dr Knox is in surgery at present. He can't take any calls."

“It’s urgent, do you hear? Put me through. It’s Dr Crabbe.” I realise I’m shouting then the phone clicks.

His voice is so familiar but strangely quiet. Is it surprise or suspicion?

“Buster? Buster, is it you?” At the sound of my old nickname tears well up in my eyes.

Chapter Four

I get to Knutsford services about three o'clock on Thursday afternoon. It's taken a long time. People are more cautious about who they pick up nowadays. Maybe I just look rougher than I think.

I'm on edge. I keep going over what Jed said on the phone for clues as to how he reacted. I spent last night under a hedge near the M58 and, as well as being uncomfortable, I tortured myself with bad memories and fears of what lies ahead.

I'm deadly cold, even though I'm sitting on a bench in the sunshine outside the service station. It's an ordinary scene, with people coming and going in cars and coaches. I don't belong in it and I'm wishing I wasn't here but I feel the notebooks in my coat pocket and know I have to see this through.

At last Jed comes and I know him at once but he doesn't recognise me. He hasn't changed, at least not as dramatically as I have. Still got the MG and still wearing the old sweat pants and crumpled tee shirt he keeps in the bottom drawer of his desk so he can rush off to play badminton after work.

He's wandering blindly round the car park looking at people and then he heads off towards the service building. I have to approach him. For a moment I consider just

melting back into the bushes, it would be easy to disappear from here, catch a lift to anywhere. I think of Vicky and heave to my feet.

“Jed.”

He spins round. “Buster! Jeez! Buster what happened to you?” He tries to hide his dismay with a smile but it wobbles.

“It’s called streetlife.” I smile back but my smile falters too. I’m thinking how we were students together at the Infirmary, of all the fun and earnestness we shared. Memories of those days seem to be all highs and lows, everything full of meaning. We were driven by emotion and idealism, then we flattened out into the years of working together, sharing the practice. We both had beautiful wives, lovely children, professional recognition, everything going for us, until I messed it all up.

“Let’s get something to eat. I’m starving.” What he means is “Let me feed you Jack, you look like you need it.” Why does he feel guilty about me? It’s written all over his face.

I let him buy me a burger, chips and coffee. At first he doesn’t say much, just watches me eat but soon it begins.

“Where have you been all this time? Why didn’t you keep in touch?”

“After what I did? I couldn’t face anyone. What use was I to anyone – to myself even? I didn’t want to be me any more.”

I’ve managed that pretty well, being somebody else or nobody maybe. Nobody that means anything to anybody. Nobody that’s required to do anything.

“Don’t talk bollocks, Jack. How could you just walk away like that? How do you think I felt? How do you think Corinne felt?”

Corinne? I stop chewing. Surely she must have been delighted? For a moment I look at him and see the sports car driver, the respected member of a professional body, the consumer of precious spare time hobbies, the confident, well published academic. I shouldn't have come. The food tastes like cardboard.

"I'm sorry." I push the food container away.

Suddenly he smiles and he's just my good mate Jed again, as if those bad times didn't lie between us.

"You look different."

"Yeah. I'm someone else. My street name is the Hermit."

He bursts out laughing.

"Okay. It started because of my surname but now it's become me or I've become it. I like it. I like the freedom, the anonymity, the way I can just move on and leave everything behind when I've had enough."

Is this true? Even now as I sit here remnants of those other selves, the husband, the doctor, the drinker – the father, are rising up, resurrected by Jed's presence.

"Why didn't you ring before? Even just to let me know you were okay? And why now? It's been over four years."

"I wasn't okay. I told you. I wanted to be someone else. But now I need your help. I couldn't turn to the family. They wouldn't understand. There'd be too many strings and recriminations. I don't need money or a place to stay. I need you to help me find someone."

He's surprised. He was expecting a request for material help, cash or care.

"What do you mean?"

“I met this woman on the street, in Liverpool. She’d been in care somewhere, I don’t know where. The squat we were in was raided and the police took her away. I can’t find out where they sent her. I need to find her, Jed.” My voice breaks unexpectedly. He’s staring at me as if I’m crazy.

“In care? What for?”

“She’s got problems, learning disabilities.” I don’t want to go into the horror of it all now.

“You’ve been having a hot affair with a woman with learning disabilities?” He pushes his chair back and frowns at me.

“It’s not like that.”

He doesn’t understand. I have to tell him the bare bones of the story and give him Fisher’s book to read while I finish my coffee. I don’t show him the notebooks; he’s not ready for them yet.

He’s fascinated, I can tell, quite apart from his desire to help me. As a medical man he’s intrigued and perhaps he assigns the same motives to me. Now my search makes sense to him.

He shuts the book, puffs out his cheeks. “Jeez, Buster, is this for real?”

I nod. “No one will tell me anything. You’ve got contacts. You might be able to find her.”

“It means you’ll have to come back with me.”

“I don’t think I can do that, Jed.”

“Then how are we going to keep in touch? You’ve got no phone, no email address. You don’t know where you’re going to be from one day to the next. Come and stay with

me for a few days. No strings, you can leave whenever you want. We can work on this together.”

It’s tempting. Another haven of home comforts and access to information systems, a way of tracing Vicky maybe.

“But what about Becky?” Becky and Corinne were never great friends but we often used to go out as a foursome and after what happened I can’t see Becky having any time for me whatsoever.

“Becky and I split up two years ago.” He looks away and his face hardens. “She’s living in Bournemouth now with an organic farmer. I don’t get to see the kids often enough.”

“Oh.” I forget that other people’s lives carry on when you leave them. Inside me Jed has been frozen the way he was when I last saw him. I thought he hadn’t changed but looking closer I can see the lines, a difference in the way he holds the muscles of his jaw. I wonder if the break up was something to do with me, an outward ripple from the trauma I caused to everyone around me.

“It was nothing to do with you, with what happened. We just grew away from each other.”

I hope desperately that he’s not lying. I’ve got enough to feel guilty about already.

“What about Corinne? My family? I wouldn’t want them to find out I was around.”

There’s a silence. His mouth works at the corner. He’s dredging something up from inside.

“Jack, Corinne got married again. Eighteen months ago. She’s pregnant.”

The words hit me like stones. “Pregnant? But she’s –“

“Yep, over forty. Forty-four to be exact. Not impossible.”

No, not impossible. I hadn't argued when she told me she would divorce me. At least she waited till I was recovering from the amputation. Nothing could put our marriage together again after Angela's death. And, yes, sometimes I'd thought about her meeting a new man, but never ever did I think she might have another child. How could she? As if anything could replace Angela. Now, I want to put my head on the table and cry.

"She had a hard time, Jack. Now she's happy. He's a nice guy. She just wants to forget. Make a new life." He's trying to be gentle, not to blame me. "Come on back with me. No one will know. Corinne lives in Gloucester now. You won't need to see anyone if you don't want to. We'll see if we can find this Vicky. You can rest up, make plans. No strings, I promise."

I should be happy for Corinne but I feel betrayed. I'm gutted. I feel so empty I can't think straight and the next thing I know, I'm squashed in the passenger seat of the MG, speeding down the M6 as the darkness closes in.

The first night he leaves me alone but he's only biding his time. I know the probing will soon begin. Straight talking he'll call it and I won't like it. I've been free these five years, free to be whoever I want and I haven't had to justify or explain myself to anyone.

It's late when we get back to Worcester and although something's tugging inside me as we travel along the twisting rural lanes that are so different from the flat Lancashire landscape, from industrial Manchester or the decayed elegance of Liverpool, there's little to see in the dark and we soon hit the outskirts of Ronkswood. Jed still lives in the 1930s villa he bought when we set up the practice.

"This place is a bit big for you to rattle round in on your own." The space and silence of the house threaten me.

“I keep thinking the kids will come to stay.” In the hall light, his face is woebegone then he wipes it with a cheery smile. “You know me. I’m one of those stay-put people.”

Not like me. For a moment all the places I’ve been in the last few years, all the people I’ve known briefly, melt together. Was there any meaning in it all? I don’t know.

“Want a drink?” He stops, hesitates.

“No, I don’t think so. I’m tired.” I’m so weary my brain is rambling.

“Me too and I’ve got surgery first thing in the morning. It’s half day tomorrow though. When I get back we can start trying to find your friend.”

I lie awake in the cold bed that no one’s slept in for ages. I should feel comfortable but I feel shut in, frightened of what’s coming next. Even Jed, my oldest and best friend, frightens me with his ordered life, his clocks and duties, his possessions and this house that holds him in one spot. I’d forgotten this kind of life and now it seems alien to me. Maybe it’s just his hopes that tie him, hopes of resurrecting the past, bringing back Becky or at least the kids. I suppose it’s easy to find meaning while you still have hopes.

I thought I’d left all that behind, those excuses that keep hope alive, help you to carry on, but now, after years of wandering, I realise there is some sense of purpose coming back to me, seeds of hope sprouting, planted there by Vicky’s vision of Angela, of the car. I want there to be an explanation, whether it condemns me or not. I need a resolution.

I know they said I wasn’t drunk when the accident happened. I had to believe them, they’d tested my blood, but I knew it was my fault. There was no one else involved. I hit a tree on a straight road. Corinne knew it too and she made it plain the only time she visited me in hospital, to tell me about the divorce.

“You shouldn’t have driven. You had the shakes didn’t you? Tell me, Jack.”

I close my eyes, grope in my brain. I can’t remember. I still can’t remember.

Corinne pops up stroking her huge belly. She's looking with love at someone I can't see, a blank space in the distance. It's not that I can't see, rather I don't want to look, don't want to see my replacement, don't want to identify the roundness in her body that will replace Angela, put Angela firmly in her grave.

Spectres plague me all night and when I finally fall asleep I don't wake until the sun is way up in the sky and Jed is long gone.

There's a note in the kitchen telling me to help myself and he's left a set of clean clothes that makes me laugh. He's living in the time when we were both much of a size. He's retained his well nourished, toned and muscular body while I'm much thinner, my flesh loose and stringy from poor food and the wrong kind of exercise.

I put on my own clean clothes and stuff the dirty gear in Jed's washing machine. The kitchen is spotlessly clean. There are no feminine touches but a multitude of cooking utensils, jars of herbs and spices. Someone here likes to cook. It must be Jed but I'm surprised. He never used to be able to boil an egg.

Over cornflakes and toast I get out Fisher's book and the information from *The Writers' Handbook*.

The phone rings for a long time, so long that I'm surprised when someone finally answers.

"Red Rose Press." The northern accent is muted but unmistakeable.

"My name's Crabbe. Dr Jack Crabbe. I have a copy of a book you published. *Strange But True Tales of Lancashire*. I'd like to contact the author, Eric Fisher. It's in connection with some research I'm doing."

“Eric Fisher? Just a minute.” I can hear his fingers clicking on his keyboard. “He hasn’t written anything for us lately but we do have contact details for him, if they’re still up to date, that is.”

“I’d be very grateful if you could put me in touch with him.”

“Dr Crabbe, you’ll appreciate I can’t just give out confidential information. If you’d like to leave your number, I’ll see if I can contact Eric and make him aware of your interest.”

It’s fair enough. I give him Jed’s number. “Tell him it’s about Vicky, the chicken shed girl.”

I make more coffee. This is luxury, to be able to boil a kettle whenever you want, but then there’s a price.

There’s a bottle of whisky in the cupboard where Jed keeps the coffee. My hand falters but settles on the coffee jar. Poor Jed in this empty house full of shades and memories. I hope he’s not going the same way I did.

Don’t watch the phone, I keep telling myself. I flick through the *Strange But True Tales* again but nothing goes in. I will Fisher to ring but the only noise is the gurgling of the washing machine.

There doesn’t seem to be a washing line outside so I stick everything in the tumble dryer. The garden looks neat, but nothing special, tidy lawns, shrubs and a few flowers. My guess is he pays a gardener to take care of it. It lacks the visible passion of an enthusiast. There’s still a kids’ slide at the bottom end, looking a bit worse for wear now. The phone starts to ring as I come back in.

“It’s only me. Are you okay?”

“Checking up on me? Bet you thought I’d run away.”

“Why would I think that? I just wanted to let you know I’ll be finishing up here about twelve thirty so I’ll be back around one. I’ll pick something up for lunch.”

I’m on pins all the time he’s on the phone. I can picture Fisher dialling, shrugging his shoulders, ripping up the phone number and chucking it in the bin before getting back to his latest manuscript.

I wouldn’t admit it to Jed but I am tempted to disappear, dissolve back into no man’s land. I can feel this easy living seeping into my bones already. I only have to stretch out my hand for hot water, shelter, good food, a comfortable bed. It’s Maslow’s hierarchy of needs but even this basic level is something I’ve learned to live without and it makes me feel unsettled.

The phone rings again. It’s a female voice, someone called Sarah, asking for Jed. She’s curious, wondering who I am. I feel awkward as I tell her Jed’s at work. It feels like a mistake, coming here. Everything’s different, Jed’s life has changed and learning about Corinne with her new husband and her baby has thrown me. It’s more pain, after I’d got used to dealing with the old stuff, or at least burying it, bandaging it. Now it’s like a fresh wound or rather an old one ripped open. If it wasn’t for Vicky I’d be out the door and headed anywhere a long way away.

And there’s more to come. The price to pay for Jed’s hospitality will be having to explain the past, justify my behaviour towards him, Corinne, the world. I suppose he’ll want to help me return, come back into this two edged world of comfort and stress. Some people can juggle it and some can’t. How far am I prepared to go for Vicky’s sake? I don’t know.

Jed comes in promptly with a couple of bulging carrier bags and a pizza in a box.

“I’ll cook something decent tonight.” He’s storing the things he’s bought in the fridge and the cupboards with an efficiency that strikes a chord in me from the old days. “I taught myself to cook after Becky left. I really enjoy it now. Not like student days is it? Beans and chips and no one ever washed up. Wonder we didn’t get salmonella.”

He slices the pizza neatly, reaches into the fridge for a bottle of beer then stops.

“It’s okay, go ahead. I’ll have a cup of tea.”

“You’ve really stayed off the juice?”

“Yeah. It’s like hypnotherapy. Every time I’m tempted there’s a stock of horror pictures ready to flash up. Shame isn’t it, it took killing my daughter to stop me? Now I’ve no inclination to drink.”

“Or to live?”

Only he could get away with saying that to me. I look down. The pizza on my plate looks wooden.

“Don’t try your amateur psychology on me.” I laugh, but he’s right. I’ve been running away for the last five years.

He lets it go after that and tells me about his morning, the procession of warts, bad backs, crying babies, pregnant mums. It gives me a twinge of nostalgia.

“Coughs and colds are starting already and it’s only September. Look at the glorious weather and I’ve got a queue of sniffing, sneezing patients.”

“So much for the wonders of medicine we thought we were going in to when we were green young docs.” I can almost kid myself into his world, my old world.

He’s finished his pizza, I’ve barely touched mine. I tell him about Eric Fisher but the phone still hasn’t rung.

“By the way, someone called Sarah rang. I forgot all about it.” I let a query hang in my voice.

He grins. “She works at the hospital. Medical Records. We met at a PCT training day. We see each other on and off, nothing serious. Let’s have a look on the Internet.”

His study is neat and modern, all blond wood and stainless steel. We type in keywords, chicken shed girl, Scarclough, Vicky Appleton, Mary Appleton, deprived child: anything we can think of and we get millions of hits.

It’s amazing the stuff that comes up, everything that I painfully dug out of the library archives and much more but nothing that tells us what happened to Vicky after she was found.

It surprises me how many similar cases there have been in England alone, never mind world wide. And now there are stories of kids abandoned in inner city centres, running wild with dogs, living in drains, God knows what else.

There’s been a lot of scientific interest and debate on Vicky and we end up with a list of articles from social science and medical journals. Most of them only deal with the general facts of a number of cases including Vicky’s.

We’re only part way through them when the phone rings. Jed comes back with a quizzical smile. “It’s for Dr Crabbe.”

“Dr Crabbe, this is Eric Fisher.”

My heart jumps. “Thank you for calling back. It’s very important to me. I’m doing some research on the psychological effects of severe language deprivation on young children and I came across your account of Vicky the Chicken Shed Girl.”

“I don’t know if I can help you. I wrote that piece quite some time ago and you know it’s only a general account, not based on academic or medical research.”

“That’s okay. I’m particularly interested in cases in England, because of specific cultural values. I’ve got plenty of stuff on how she was discovered but what I’m trying to find out is where she went when she left Ormskirk hospital. I need to contact the relevant institution so that I can research her treatment regime.”

“I don’t know if I’ve got anything like that. Can’t you find out from hospital records?”

“It was such a long time ago. The relevant notes seem to be missing. I’ve tried the FHSA archive but no luck so far. Part of the problem is that initially at least she had no official identity, no medical records, GP or anything.”

“Let me see.” I can hear papers rustling. “I’ve still got my original notes, I never throw anything away, but they’re a bit rough and ready. Tell you what, leave it with me and I’ll get back to you.”

“That’s very kind of you. I’m sorry for taking up your time.”

“No problem Doctor, I’ll be glad to help.”

Jed’s standing in the doorway, grinning. “That was very convincing.”

“Yeah.” I almost convinced myself. Now I’ve put the phone down, I’ve got a strange dispossessed feeling as if I’ve slipped from one person to another and back and now I’m not sure which one I am.

“I’ve found something too. There’s a piece of published research. Someone worked with her, made a longitudinal study. It’s published as a chapter in a psychology book. I’ve got the details here.”

We can’t access the chapter online but we get the publishing details. The book is called *Studies in Language Deprivation*. The chapter itself is by someone called Dr Alexander Soames and it’s dated 1980. ‘Educating Vicky – The Language and Development of a Severely Deprived Child.’

It's got to be her. I'm elated. "How are we going to get it?" We look on Amazon but there's no mention of it. Jed can order it from the hospital library but it might take some time. I can't wait.

"It mightn't be her anyway."

"Oh come on. Who else could it be?"

"But there are lots of them, loads of stuff here." He's scrolling through websites, links to chat rooms. "It's like a freakshow. Some of it's real sicko stuff."

This sobers me. I think of how Jimmy Atherton still sees Vicky as a monster, of the thrill-seeking public, gobbling up lurid press stories, but if these accounts help me to find Vicky, I'm glad they exist.

I peer over his shoulder. "A lot of it seems academic. Aren't you a bit curious? You've got to admit, it's intriguing."

"I suppose so, there are moral and philosophical issues. Is that why you're so interested in her? Why you've come out of hiding?"

"I told you there's something about her, something special, uncanny even, but she isn't a freak. She's real. Anyway, who says I've come out of anything? I'm only here for a few days – remember?"

After Jed goes back to the practice, I spend another hour trawling through the mass of links on wild and confined children that go back several hundred years. These accounts with their woodcut illustrations seem to bear no relation to the living woman I know. I'm disturbed at the same time as I'm fascinated. In the end it gets too much. Information overload sets in and I switch off and think about going out to the town centre, to the library. Maybe there'd be a copy of the Soames book.

I'm not sure if I can face the town. I might bump into someone I know and then the questions will start. Chances are no one would recognise me anyway but I can't be sure. And I'm not ready for it, not ready for the associations familiar places will set off. In the end I sit in front of the TV staring at the afternoon quiz shows and adverts for stairlifts.

Eric Fisher rings back in the evening, while Jed is cooking chilli con carne.

"I've got some information for you."

"Great. That's fantastic. Thanks so much for ringing back."

"No problem. She went to the Leadbetter Institute. It's a residential place or a rehab facility for damaged kids. It's in Cambridgeshire, or it was. We're talking nearly thirty years ago."

"You don't have an address or a phone number?"

"Sorry. It's just a mention in some notes I took when interviewing some of the staff who looked after her at the hospital. I couldn't use it for confidentiality reasons. Shouldn't be telling you really, but after all these years –"

"My research will respect that confidentiality. It's very kind of you to help me. This may be very useful."

"Might just be a dead end, Doctor. Who knows if the place is still there? Best of luck anyway. Like to see a copy of your research when it's published."

I want to discuss it with Jed right away but he's putting our plates on the table. I try to rein in my excitement. Jed's made an effort to cook and I am starving. He drinks red wine and I have water. Every time he lifts his glass he looks at me. The food is wonderful.

"It's a long time since I ate anything this good."

"You look like you could do with a bit of feeding up."

"Ever heard of the Leadbetter Institute?"

“Can’t say I have.”

“Fisher phoned back. It’s where Vicky went. Some kind of rehab or children’s home.”

“Will they have taken her there then?”

“Shouldn’t think so. It’s a long time ago and if it’s a rehab, she’ll have been sent on somewhere else afterwards.”

“I ordered the book but it’ll take a few days so it looks like you’re stuck here for a bit longer.”

“This Leadbetter place is, or was, in Cambridgeshire.”

“We can look on the Net.”

“You’re staying in then? I thought you might be going out with Sarah.” The thought of an evening of chummy intimacy summons up unnamed dreads.

“Not tonight.” He stacks everything in the dishwasher. In a few minutes the kitchen looks unused again, almost clinically clean. Only the lingering smell of the food records the sensual delights it produced, and, with a spray of air freshener, he even gets rid of that.

He finishes the bottle of wine and opens another in the course of our internet search and now I look at him each time he lifts his glass. There’s not a great deal of stuff on the Leadbetter Institute but it’s there and it still exists.

Most references are to a Dr U Singh who seems to be a prolific publisher of articles. We waste a lot of time going through these but none of them refer to Vicky and most seem to have been written fairly recently.

“We’ll send them an email, saying we’re doing some research and see if we can set up a meeting.”

“We?”

“It’ll look better if there are two of us and if they check up at least one of us is legit.” His fingers are already flying over the keys. “There.” He presses the Send button before I can open my mouth.

“You are curious then? Or are there other reasons why you’re helping me like this? You might be putting your professional reputation at risk.” I don’t want it just to be for old times’ sake.

“I’m curious, I suppose. But if it was anybody else I wouldn’t do it. You’re my friend, Buster. What happened doesn’t change that. I’m just sorry you didn’t see it like that at the time. I can understand how you felt but you could have kept in touch. The fact that you didn’t, not a word all these years, that fucking hurt. It still does.” He flashes me a look of suppressed rage as he pours another glass of wine. His hand is unsteady as he puts the bottle down.

How can I say that he’s part of another time, another me, a whole bad scene I just had to shut away and ignore? I don’t want to make things worse.

“You don’t know how many times I’ve stood in a phone box, picked up the phone and put it down again.”

“Then why?”

“Have you ever done something so bad you couldn’t look at it, couldn’t have anything to do with it? Well, multiply that by a thousand. I couldn’t face myself, I still can’t. Do you think I could face Corinne, colleagues, even you? Look at the mess I left you in with the practice.”

“Oh fuck the practice, Jack. We’re talking about you and me. You needed help and I thought you would have known that you could count on me.”

This is the drink talking. I know the practice means a lot to him.

“I’m here now.”

“Okay, but you haven’t dealt with anything, have you? Corinne’s moved on, let go but you Jack, you’re like Sleeping Beauty. You’ve fenced it all off, but you’ve fenced yourself in too.” He stares moodily into his glass.

“I can’t forget Angela.”

“No one’s asking you to forget her. Do you think Corinne has forgotten her? There are always fresh flowers on her grave.”

I’ve not only killed her, I’ve neglected her grave.

“It’s time you stopped feeling bloody sorry for yourself.”

Sorry for myself! How can he say this? Doesn’t he realise how much I hate myself?

“At least looking for this Vicky shows you’re thinking about someone else for a change. Do you really think you can help her? In cases I’ve read about, rehabilitation is extremely difficult, at best only partial. Do you think you can succeed when everyone else has failed, after all these years? And what about you, isn’t it time you rejoined the real world?”

Rehabilitate her? I don’t want to do that. I want her just the way she is. I’ve got the feeling whatever she’s got that ties me to her, her way of seeing things, is something she has because she isn’t like the rest of us. Jed’s wrong. My interest in Vicky is selfish; I want her to help me.

“The real world?” I watch as he slugs the glass of wine down. “You mean *your* world? Leave me alone, Jed, I’m not one of your patients.”

“It just seems such a waste.”

There’s nothing more to say. We sit for a few minutes in silence, then he turns the computer off and swings round in his chair.

“And if we find Vicky – what then?”

“I don’t know.”

supper fish marjorie like

bath yes good marjorie medication pinkcup cocoa

darkwarm marjorie roomquiet itch ticklemarjorie

yes good nice dark yes

light nolight stoplight martin nomartin

nostopit nostopit martin nodirtybitch no marjorie be good yes

nomoredirtybitch martin notellmrsmitHELL no marjorie good goodgirl

martin noshout no marjorie scared martin red redmartinshout marjorieblack red come

off martin onto marjorie black hide wardrobe hidemarjorie hide cupboard vickyhide

cupboard novicky vickymarjorie hide marjorie dark

I can’t sleep. Jed’s words keep going through my head. Rehabilitating Vicky is something that never even occurred to me. She needs protection but I don’t see any value in trying to change her. As for rehabilitating myself, I don’t see any value in that either.

Why should I want to be back where I was before when I made such a mess of it the first time?

Jed seems to veer between pitying me and being angry at me. Why does he want me to be like him when I'm content as I am? Except that I'm not really content. He's right about me fencing things off. I see Corinne putting flowers on the grave I can never let myself think about. The 'if only' game starts again. If only I had put Angie in a cab instead of driving. If only I'd got help before the drinking got out of control. If only I knew for sure what had happened.

The space where my leg used to be aches intolerably. I put my hand out of the bed to feel the unresponsive surface of the prosthesis. It brings the past and present together.

I'm always looking for reasons. Why drink is a demon for me and not for others. Was it all down to circumstances or was it something in my nature, my family, my genes?

In the end I get up and spend the rest of the night on the computer going through the journal articles we looked up. It's a depressing parade of half-human creatures that never quite seem to get the hang of social living. Jed's right about that. Yet Vicky seemed happy enough, going around with Rita and Kindi, trotting along with me, eating ice cream. But she had a dark side too; the times she spent in the cupboard; her fear of the police and the place called Medoban. Even when she was on her own, it seemed she didn't have much control over what happened to her. And yet she could make people do things. I remember the woman in the gardens, handing over her baby's fluffy toy. These thoughts set up a bundle of questions in my mind, questions I really want to find the answers to.

Friday evening, Jed goes out for a meal with Sarah. I can tell he doesn't like leaving me, but I'm glad to be alone. I don't want another evening like last night.

I spend some of the time looking through his photo albums but this is a bad mistake, because it's all there. Me as the green student, all big ears and silly grin, both of us at graduation, as interns, how happy we look, how – clean.

Then the foursomes, girls I barely remember and before long Becky and Corinne with padded shoulders and big hairdos. It's all soft skins, innocent eyes and open faces. I'm in tears even before I come to the one of Angela's christening and then I start thinking about the whisky bottle in the kitchen cupboard.

I put the albums away and sit down in front of the TV with a cup of tea, idly switching channels. Something's trying to form in my mind but I keep pushing it away. I tune into a quiz show but I can't concentrate on the questions. Pictures from the photo albums keep intervening.

In the end I pick a CD from Jed's blues collection and settle down to Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee. If I'm going to be miserable I might as well enjoy it. I let myself lull into the repetitive riffs.

The music drops back somewhere and the picture comes, the one that's been trying to push its way through the thicket of my thoughts.

It's Corinne putting flowers on Angela's grave. It's more like a sepulchre, a huge rococo affair in white marble with a sad angel on the top. I don't like it and change it for a pink granite square as Terry and McGhee go into, 'Sun's Gonna Shine.'

Corinne can't bend down properly because of her belly. She's talking to the stone, to Angela. Someone else is with her, a man, but I can't see him, only his hands as he takes the flowers from her, puts them in a vase, places it in front of the stone. His hands are soft, manicured with black hairs on the knuckles. A dandelion is daring to grow on top of

Angela and his hand plucks it out, tosses it aside. I expect Angela’s hand to shoot up out of the soil, like the final scene in *Carrie*. It shouldn’t be him.

Nothing happens. Corinne straightens up, puts a hand to the small of her back. She looks old, careworn, till she smiles at him and there’s radiance there. I open my eyes. The music’s stopped. It should be me.

yesmrsmitchell	take medication	yes goodgirlmarjorie
toast pinkcup tea be good yes	redwhitepill pinkpill	hot tea hermitjack make
tea make tea vicky novicky	marjorie goodgirlmarjorie	yes sit chair
tv yes peggy maureen	sit chair niceandquiet	goodgoodgirl

Saturday morning Jed plays badminton. I walk in the wood trying not to think about Corinne or Angela. My leg is comfortable now it’s getting regularly cleaned and a fresh sock every day. Even my hip’s quiet now that I can pace my walking.

In my memory it is always spring in this wood with the overpowering scent and colour of a myriad bluebells but now the trees are brilliant with red and orange.

The turning leaves remind me of Brow Lane farm. The atmosphere is different here but I can’t say why. There’s that same sense of presence but it’s not as brooding. Here I get a sense of being engulfed in living things. I can’t say I believe in a spirit of the wood

or any such thing but it's as if something's watching me. It's a benign feeling though; there's none of the horror I felt at Brow Lane. No triffids here.

Only a week has passed since I met Vicky. Such a lot seems to have happened in that space of time. Maybe it's that I seem to have changed so much in just those few days; as if she's a catalyst. Back on the road to the house I think again about going into town but instead I turn into the drive and let the safety of the house swallow me.

Sunday afternoon, Jed takes me out for a drive in the country, which is full of other people driving about. What I really want to do is go to the cemetery and look at Angela's grave but at the same time I'm scared stiff of doing so. I thought about it all last night. Now I've let the image out I'm haunted by it, it's pushing everything out, even Vicky but it's terrifying. It's as if I were going to meet Angela herself, alive and ready to accuse me.

Monday lunchtime, Jed brings home a list of institutions and homes he's managed to obtain from a social worker he knows. There are hundreds of names but Medoban's not there. After lunch he goes out on house calls. I take the spare key and a deep breath and set out for town.

It's a long walk. There are forgotten memories at almost every step and though some of them are painful, there's a sense of coming home, even though I've chosen to dissociate myself from the place.

When I come to the tall terraced house, near the canal, where I lived as a child, I could cry, thinking of my mother cleaning the windows and my father tinkering with his old Ford Pop in the rented garages that used to be next door. In their place stands a modern apartment block. The house itself looks shabby with grimy windows. It looks like a bedsit dwelling with its mismatched curtains on each of the three storeys. Mum would have

been horrified to see it like this. I'm glad she can't, just as I'm glad she and Dad can't see me now. They were so proud of me when I became a doctor.

I turn down by the Cathedral and take the path along the river, dawdling and stopping to watch the swans. The river is high but in a good mood today, slipping along as if it would never dream of raging over its banks and flooding the streets. Memories jostle my mind at every step. I remember walks taken with Corinne and Angela when she was tiny, and later, those special Saturday afternoons Angela and I had together while Corinne was off spending time with her friends.

There are lots of people out and about, enjoying the late sunshine but I don't see anyone I recognise and this gives me the courage to turn up Bridge Street to the town and venture into the library where I ask for the Soames book.

They haven't got it and I decline the assistant's offer to order it. I've no library card and I don't plan on staying long enough to use one.

I can't put it off any longer but my feet drag as I approach the tall gates of the cemetery. Looking at the neat rows of graves, I realise I haven't a clue where Angela is buried.

At the time I'd been glad they wouldn't let me out of hospital for the funeral. That way I could almost pretend nothing had happened. Penny came to see me afterwards and told me how distraught Corinne had been, how she'd had to lean on her father as the coffin went in to the grave. My sister's lips twisted as she told me this and she delivered the story to the air above my head without looking at me. Matt couldn't bring himself to come at all. Jed came nearly every day and he never reproached me but his miserable silences said so much it would have been better if he'd stayed away.

“Okay mate?” It’s a gardener with a lawnmower and I’m in his way. I’ve been so lost in the past I didn’t even hear the noise of the engine.

“I need to find a grave. I’m visiting a distant relative.”

“Go to the lodge.” He points to a stone building across the cemetery at a second pair of gates. “They’ll be able to tell you.”

When I find it, it’s so ordinary; third from the end on one of many interminable rows, not, as I’d imagined, in a sweet shady corner under a tree. The stone is small and plain, white marble, no angels, no sentimental verses, just her name and the dates of her short life.

My stomach is a cold lump as I look at the brilliant chrysanths flaunting their life on the plinth. They’re still quite fresh so Corinne has been here recently, maybe over the weekend and there’s not much chance of bumping into her here. I still look round guiltily for a moment until the grave claims my whole being.

There’s not even a curve in the ground to suggest that the contoured body of a person lies beneath. I think of Angela in there, what she will now look like, the natural process of decay finishing the job that I started.

Up here, everything is neat and tidy. I put my hand out to the stone. It’s cold despite the sun and it’s hard. “Angela-a-a,” Vicky’s voice whispers in my head and I remember the way she looked at me as she said it. It’s linked to the way she touched my leg that first night.

The sun beats down on the stones, on the rows of rectangular graves. If anything remains of Angela, it isn’t here and I’m no longer afraid of being here. I can see the first signs of fading on the petals of the chrysanthemums.

It isn't difficult for me to walk away but as I make my way back along the river there seems to be desolation in the way the branches hang down over the murky water and questions in the way the water shifts from brown to green and back.

I feel as if I've achieved something but my whole body feels weighed down nevertheless.

"Here." Jed rushes in at four o'clock and slaps a book down on the kitchen table. "Can't stop. Flu vaccinations, then surgery and family planning clinic. Tuesdays are a nightmare"

I'm glad to be left alone with the book. The chapter on Vicky is about thirty pages long and I can't wait to get into it.

Educating Vicky - The Language and Development of a Severely Deprived Child

A. V. Soames.

In 1975 a female child was discovered in a chicken shed on a Lancashire farm. The child, subsequently named Vicky, could not walk properly or speak when found and appeared to have been severely neglected for a long period.

We will never know the true story of Vicky's early childhood for her mother was found dead on the farm, no one else knew of her existence and Vicky herself was, and remains, unable to tell us about her early years. Who knows what her

experiences and feelings were? Physical evidence suggested that she had been almost totally isolated from a very early age.

Some months after she came to us, a small notebook diary kept by Vicky's mother was forwarded to us by the police. This had been removed from the farm when Vicky was rescued and had been overlooked in the property office. The entries in this diary, which covered the period around Vicky's birth, corroborated the evidence of almost total isolation and make painful reading. It was plain that Vicky's mother had suffered some kind of psychiatric breakdown and had been unable to cope with Vicky's birth. Police had been unable to identify or trace her father.

When Vicky was found, she weighed twenty one kilograms and appeared to be about five years old. However, when she was admitted to hospital, doctors estimated her real age at eight-and-a-half to nine. She had been naked except for an old shirt when found and she appeared to be impervious to heat or cold.

After a three-month period of physical rehabilitation, during which Vicky's weight rose to thirty kilograms, she was transferred to my care at the Leadbetter Institute for educational training and psychiatric treatment.

By this time, she had learned to walk almost normally and was accustomed to wearing clothes. She had begun to respond to those around her and had a small stock of words. "Stop it", "No" and "Shut up" were the only words she had been able to say

when first found but during her three months at the hospital she had learned to name some items, notably things of which she was fond, such as, "redcup," "chips," "coke", and "marsbar."

Apart from these words she did not speak. Whether this was because she had not learned any other words, or whether she did not feel the need to use them, we could not tell. Her speech was only used to express desire or refusal.

By the time she came to the Institute, she was toilet trained, although occasional bouts of incontinence still occurred. A major problem was her habit of playing with her genitals as a very young child might, regardless of where she was or who might be present. No amount of disapproval would persuade her to desist and the only method that sometimes worked was bribery with sweets or some other desired treat.

Staff at the hospital had described Vicky as exhibiting little emotion except fear. When something frightened her she would hide under her bed or in any confined space, the toilet cubicle being a particular favourite.

After the first few weeks with us, she became more confident in her environment and less afraid of those around her. Occasional bouts of angry behaviour emerged when some desire was frustrated. Her anger took the form of wordless screaming and jumping up and down, rather than violence against things or other persons and soon ended when she had exhausted herself.

Vicky quickly settled down and made good relationships with the nurses and doctors. At this time she had no contact with other patients as we felt it best to concentrate on developing her social skills within a small group of reliable and sympathetic people.

She soon identified favourites, Nurse K, myself, and Dr P. She had learned to smile and laugh but she used these expressions sparingly and usually inappropriately or manipulatively to get something she wanted. It was so rare to see her express any feeling however, that when a smile or a giggle did occur, it seemed intensely meaningful.

This was a concentrated learning period for Vicky but was equally valuable to us. By observing her behaviour over time, we were able to assess her abilities more effectively and plan a treatment regime which we hoped would give her a reasonable chance of survival in the social world and enable her to deal with the mental trauma she must have suffered.

We remained conservative in our hopes for complete rehabilitation however, in the light of previous case studies, (Gordon and Philips 1968: Peters and Zimmerman 1971,) which tended to endorse the Critical Period Hypothesis, i.e. that there is a crucial period in childhood after which language cannot be acquired. If we accepted Dennis's belief that the critical period is over by the age of two, there was little hope for Vicky. However, Lenneberg's more generous estimation of one to ten years meant that Vicky might still acquire good

language skills and Vygotsky's argument that development takes place through social contact and not through fixed developmental stages also held some promise.

Case histories of other isolated children are few and ambivalent. Historical evidence is often anecdotal, or reflects the scientific views of the time which differ greatly from our contemporary knowledge. Overwhelmingly though, the records show that these children failed to develop full language skills. Those cases that did acquire complex spoken and written language such as the eighteenth-century Caspar Hauser and Emmie LeBlanc, may well have had the rudiments of such skills before their periods of isolation.

Between January and July 1976, Dr P or I visited Vicky daily and made extensive notes on her behaviour and on any progress we could discern. Video-recordings were also made.

At this time, although her word stock grew rapidly, it consisted only of names of things. She had a few adjectives but these were invariably attached to the thing she named, "redcup, blueball," with no concept of the adjective as a separate linguistic unit. Towards the end of the observation period she acquired a few simple verbs, "give, go, want," but she had no sense of sentence construction, no understanding of intonation.

Language was at this stage an effort for her. She rarely responded when spoken to and did not appear to understand for example, the particular intonation and syntactical structure that makes an utterance into a question. The elicitation of a

response often seemed to have more to do with our body language, signs and gestures, than with the content of our speech. She was also remarkably responsive to our moods, even when we projected what we felt was a professional image.

For example, Nurse K's mother died a few months after Vicky's arrival. Nurse K continued to work her shifts as normal but when she came on the ward, Vicky immediately noticed her, watched her carefully for some minutes, then went up to her and touched her eyelids. This was done with such a physical expression of abjection, that we were all led to the belief that somehow she could intuit Nurse K's sense of loss.

At the end of six months Vicky registered a mental age of eighteen months on the Simon-Binet scale. She had a growing vocabulary and most encouragingly she had begun to imitate and repeat words spoken to her, indicating that she had the ability to recognise sounds and split them into words.

Psychological investigations indicated a wide variation of functioning in different areas so that while she had a mental age of eighteen months in areas requiring abstract thought, she was much nearer her physical age in concrete operations such as dressing and caring for herself.

Some nine months after she was discovered, we began intensive training with Vicky. She was introduced to a small class of other children and showed great interest in puzzles, colours, painting and particularly music. Her vocabulary expanded rapidly and she began to respond to others more

readily, although her speech still remained mostly monosyllabic.

There seemed to be a widening gap between what Vicky understood of what she heard, and what she could verbally express herself. Within a further six months, she demonstrated understanding of most conversation going on round her, but although she began to string words together, ostensibly in a sentence, the word-string had no structure or meaning, being simply composed of unrelated units.

She could not produce a question and was unaware of past or future tenses. She was unable to use subjective or objective pronouns and referred to everybody, including herself, by name.

By January 1977, she had achieved a great deal in comprehending the world around her. She enjoyed the company of other children and seemed happiest when in the classroom using coloured blocks, letters and art materials. She would sit for hours listening to records or the radio, totally enraptured.

She loved to go shopping and was attracted by clothes and jewellery in bright colours. Unfortunately she had no concept of paying for things and was an inveterate shoplifter, which added to her propensity for scratching her private parts in public, meant that shopping trips were usually fraught with difficulties. Her carers also noted that complete strangers sometimes came up and gave her presents; items they were wearing, pretty scarves, or costume jewellery. This only happened occasionally but often enough to be noticed. There

seemed to be no explanation, Vicky gave no discernible sign to these strangers although she readily accepted their gifts.

For the most part Vicky appeared happy but she was still very quiet and serious for a young child. She could not understand jokes or any of the automatic forms of speech that most of us use in everyday communication such as greetings, swearing or pleasantries. Although she seemed extremely sensitive to the moods of others, we felt that this was due to her heightened ability to interpret body language and gestures rather than any response to intonation. Physically, although she had gained weight and could now walk quite normally, activities such as sports and running remained difficult for her. Physiotherapy sessions were continued to develop her muscular and motor skills.

Her speech remained at the most basic level of communication. Her words were reduced to the bare minimum required to achieve fulfilment of her wants and her demeanour was that of a silent child whose experiences were still locked inside her.

There is an unspoken sadness in this narrative that fills me with a sense of loss, the loss of the lively childhood Vicky should have had and was still deprived of even after her rescue.

As I read I keep finding little things I recognise in the Vicky I know that relate her to this poor child on the paper. There are pages of tables and test results following this

section which although medically fascinating, distance me from Vicky as a person. I have to keep reminding myself that this is Vicky and not just a case history.

What do I mean, 'just a case history'? All case histories are people. I am ashamed that this appears as something of a revelation to me.

I skip through the tests which mostly show how Vicky's language use developed from one word names to simple sentences. As the test data unfolds however, it becomes clear that her progress peaked, then slowed gradually to the point where she did not seem to learn further grammatical structures or social constructions. It was as if she had come to the end of the line as far as linguistic ability was concerned. Soames's text too becomes disillusioned.

By the end of 1978, almost three years after Vicky first came to us, we realised she was no longer responding to our efforts to improve her language skills. She was able to communicate her wants and needs in basic word-strings but could not be easily understood because of the incompleteness of the sentences she used, nor could she initiate or engage in the easy conversation that most people take for granted. We did not think she would be able to function normally in a family fostering situation.

Vicky was now twelve years old and standing on the threshold of puberty. The rubbing at her genitals which we had been unable to prevent, now developed into full blown masturbation and she began to show signs of physical attraction to the opposite sex, developing intense crushes on older boys

among her classmates and younger male members of the Institute staff.

In January 1979, the decision was taken to transfer Vicky to a small residential unit, where the emphasis would be on attempting to prepare her for a place in a foster family, rather than on intensive educational training.

In summary, our work with Vicky had a positive outcome. She came to us a speechless little girl with no social skills whatever and an extreme fear of other people.

By the time she left, she was able to enjoy the company of others, make her wants known and communicate in a basic way. She had learned a great many social skills. However, her language development was limited. She did not learn to read or write and she preferred to draw answers to questions rather than give spoken answers.

We conclude that her inability to acquire full language skills is due to her early social deprivation and its psychological consequences. Other studies tend to confirm this conclusion, (Samson 1972, Whittaker and White 1970a).

While grammatical ability has been shown to be variable depending on individual circumstances, regardless of tested intelligence (Peters 1968), social competence appears to be a crucial factor in developing effective communication. The inability to develop this competence is not primarily a problem of linguistic inability, but one developing from social and psychological deprivation, from lack of stimulation from the

outside world, lack of examples to compare oneself with, and lack of others to teach one how humans behave and interact.

Vicky has never been socialised. If the Critical Period Hypothesis upholds, it may now be too late for her ever to become integrated into society. Our research seems to support this hypothesis. Despite her initial progress which gave us high hopes, she remains unsocialised and appears unable to develop further.

While it is our sincere hope that she will continue to improve we feel it is unlikely that she will ever develop sufficient literacy or social skills to enable her to function unaided in the outside world.

So that is the end of Dr Soames's involvement, just like that. There is not much in this chapter about Vicky's emotional life. How did she feel, living in an institution like that? Was she aware of being alone or different? She had been alone all her life before that, but if you don't know you are alone, can you feel lonely?

How would she have experienced the company of others? Maybe at first an overwhelming rush of sensations, fears, delights, an overload of sounds, colours, tastes, touches – but alone in a world of adults. The chapter resounds with the careful creation of an environment, no doubt out of protective motives but also to protect and control the research project of which Vicky had no knowledge. It's so impersonal. Even I can see the thing lacking here, the thing that everybody needs. The love she should have had from her own mother, was still withheld following her rescue, by the failure to introduce her into a family.

This Dr Soames makes me angry. I go out and walk into town again. I want to sit by the river, to be soothed by the serene, unstoppable movement of the water. Outside everything seems better. The sun is still warm but evening approaches, reminding me that winter will soon close in and for a moment I wonder where I will be and how I will fare.

I feel out of sorts, upset by Soames's study of Vicky and the way she was reduced to an experiment. When I pass the place where our family's allotment used to be, I think of how the three of us children used to help my father pick damsons. This plot now has become a mock-Tudor housing estate.

The river is too big a tourist attraction to be meddled with and anyway no one in their right mind would buy a house there because the Severn is so fond of rising up and drowning everything in its path.

I cross the bridge to the quieter side and find a secluded spot. My hip creaks as I get down but it's good to rest in the cool dampness where I don't need to worry about meeting anyone I know, or being disturbed by anybody, except the ghosts of course; myself young and happy, courting Corinne on the path on the other side, taking the pleasure-boat down the river and later, there I am with the darkness and the drink already settling on me, lifting Angela high on the parapet to throw bread to the swans. Her little legs kick with glee. She wears neat cotton socks and blue glitter sandals. They were all the rage that year, every kid wanted them. I remember thinking how healthy she was and then it strikes.

Dr Soames, Jed, myself – all looking at people as cases; dividing all humanity into a dichotomy of healthy/unhealthy. Instead of people we saw conditions: a healthy baby, an interesting cancer, a problematic kidney, a challenging skin disease, never noticing the power, the control we had or how we were using it.

All of us in our circle, our medical world, reinforcing our way of thinking, joined together in our rightness. What did we see when we looked at our patients, at our families, at ourselves?

Is this why I drank? Did I sense something lacking, something alienating? Yet Corinne – the delight, the first sensations of our love, I can always recall. Surely then I was different? And when I first qualified, I chose general practice from a desire to help people, not to study conditions.

I'm groping for those feelings, those sensations but they're like ancient history, dry papers, dusty stones. Corinne grew cold and bitter and blamed me. I always thought it was she who became hard and empty but now I'm seeing myself in another light and I like myself even less than the pathetic weakling I eventually saw whenever I looked in Corinne's eyes.

Across the water, the last day trippers in shirt sleeves and cotton frocks are ambling back to their cars and coaches, eating ice cream as if it were still summer but the fading light gives everything a melancholy aspect. The river slinks between us. It does speak though, as it rolls by. It murmurs "Here I am and here you are." I think of Dr Soames, recording Vicky's inability to deal with the past tense. The value of the moment rises up and swallows me so that everything drops away and when I come back, time has moved on and I don't know where I've been. There is a tinge of darkness in the sky. The air is cooler and the pleasure-boat is tying up for the day.

There is a peaceful feeling in me as I walk back, which I identify as a lack of anxiety about finding Vicky. When I first met her I wanted to help her, then to protect her, but now I realise that, even in her absence, she is teaching me, not the other way around. There is a newness in me that is disturbing but exciting, something tender that needs

protection, nurture and I know without reasoning that I am going to find Vicky. Our business together is not finished.

When I get back I find an email from the Leadbetter Institute inviting us to visit on Wednesday the thirteenth.

Dr Singh is darkly beautiful and slender. I put my hands at my back and walk slightly behind her as she gives us a conducted tour of the Institute.

It's quite a small enterprise, houses no more than thirty children at any given time and the classrooms are bright and colourful. The children have their own rooms and the décor here is muted and restful. There's a cheerful atmosphere about the place but it's still got the institutional taint, a sort of ambivalent style somewhere between a hospital and a school. It's certainly not a home.

"Of course, things are much changed since the period of time you are wishing to research." Dr Singh flashes me a brilliant smile. "I think then these areas were still dormitory wards. Some were converted to shared rooms perhaps, but certainly not the en-suite singles we have today."

When we've seen everything, including the gardens and the sports facilities, she brings us into the dining room and to a small alcove at one side where a tray of coffee and biscuits is waiting for us.

"If you would excuse me gentlemen, I have some work to attend to while you have your coffee. The files you want are laid out in the office next to mine and there is a computer set up for you to use with access to relevant sections of the electronic archive.

“When you have finished your coffee we can have a chat about our work here and then I will leave you to your research, although of course I will be around to answer any questions.” Another bewitching smile and she’s gone.

“What a beauty!” I flop into a chair and blow out my cheeks.

“Been a long time, has it?” Jed grins.

“What?” I act daft but can feel the flush on my face rising up into my hair. I’m not admitting to him that I haven’t been with a woman since Corinne. I couldn’t bear to see that hard coldness grow in someone else’s eyes. A woman would want things from me, expect things I can’t give and anyway who’d want to have sex with a one legged tramp?

“It’s not that,” I mumble. “I thought she’d be a man.” Jed says nothing, just raises his eyebrows at me so I shut up and pour the coffee.

On the way back to Dr Singh’s office, I catch sight of myself in a mirror and I look fairly presentable. Two weeks of comfortable living have almost got rid of the roughness and the little that remains is quite fashionable. Interesting, I’d call the look.

I’ve put on a bit of weight and now fit into Jed’s clothes reasonably well. I’m surprised to see how quickly I can look like the doctor I once was.

“Come on Romeo,” Jed pulls me away. “We’re here to work, remember?”

“Dr Singh, how long have you been at the Institute?” A faint perfume drifts across the desk from her to me.

“Usha, please call me Usha.” Her eyes flash when she smiles. I’m captivated. “I came here in 1996. There have been many changes since I arrived. Of course I was not then

Director here. I was in charge of Language Development, but I had been publishing research for several years in my previous post and I became Assistant Director here in 1998 and then Director when Mr Rose retired in 2002.”

“So you weren’t here when Vicky was here?”

“Of course not. That was long before my time.” She giggles.

I could kick myself. She can’t be more than forty.

“But, you know, this is a famous case. Everybody knows something about it. Since you contacted me, I’ve read up the old notes myself, so feel free to ask me anything you don’t understand. They make very interesting reading.”

“Terribly sad.”

“Of course.” Her dark eyes hold mine for a moment, each of us trying to read the other. “But an unique opportunity for study. Such cases do not occur very often.”

“We’ve read the chapter Dr Soames wrote giving an account of his work with her.” Jed’s voice is clipped, matter of fact. “He seems to have given up on her relatively quickly. I’d have expected him to continue working with her for a longer period. These cases must take time, surely?” He seems unaware of Dr Singh’s charms and pins her with a questioning stare.

The way she shrugs her shoulders is delicious.

“Work with Vicky was intensive for a long period, over three years. The Institute received funding for a precisely specified study and rehabilitation programme. A point was reached when the team agreed that little further progress could be expected.”

“So they just offloaded her?”

Dr Singh recoils slightly. Jed gives me a look. Then she gives that expressive shrug and my indignation is defused.

“What could they do? The Institute does not provide the right environment for a permanent home. It was felt that Vicky would be happier in a residential setting. There are always new cases requiring the specialist intervention of the team. This is our function, not providing permanent care.”

Jed is nodding. My foot taps involuntarily and I have to make a conscious effort to stop it.

“You will see from the notes that Vicky stopped responding to training. I’m afraid you will find the notation rather difficult to read. Most of it is handwritten and perhaps not as politically correct and precise as today’s standards demand. There were not as many central guidelines as we have today.” She looks ruefully up at a shelf full of policy folders on the wall behind her.

It’s a sign for us to get on with our reading. In the small office she leads us to, stacks of well-worn files and folders are waiting on the single desk. Jed and I take them one at a time and swap when we’ve finished each one. They’ve been laid out in chronological order and nothing seems to be missing.

It’s a fascinating record of daily life as well as the scientific data but I soon get a cold feeling. In amongst all this observation is a little lost girl who has no idea why she’s there or what is happening and she’s voiceless among these professional records.

The notes record her eagerness to learn, her early attempts to make herself understood and the terrible tantrums that expressed her frustration at her inability to do so. She’s keen to play with toys, educational games, anything colourful but she doesn’t get the point of them. And then other times, she just switches off like a tap and ignores everything round her. In this painstaking litany of Vicky’s days, certain themes stand out.

Classroom notes: 19.3.76

10.00 am. Vicky refused to play the picture matching game. When I fetched the game she said, "No" and then ignored me while I laid out the cards. She didn't speak or move for fifteen minutes while I played the game myself, talking to her all the time as if she were taking part.

Classroom notes: 19.7.76

2.00 pm. I asked Vicky to fetch the blue box of counters. Vicky gave no sign of having heard and carried on modelling a piece of Plasticene. I repeated the request three times but she gave no response. I fetched the box of counters myself and took the Plasticene away from Vicky. She remained silent and motionless for the rest of the session (about 45 minutes).¹⁶

The style of the notes is detached and attempts to keep value judgements out but there seems to be an undue emphasis on Vicky's lack of social skills and 'moral' development which increasingly seem to be cast in the light of 'bad habits'.

Nursing notes: 4.4.76

11.30 am. Vicky took Amelia's new red scarf from her locker without asking. Vicky had admired the scarf several times this week. I returned the scarf to Amelia and Vicky did not protest.

12.30 pm. Vicky appeared at the lunch table wearing Amelia's red scarf which she had taken from Amelia's locker. I took the scarf from her and explained that it belonged to Amelia.

2.00pm. Vicky came in the TV room wearing Amelia's scarf again. I took the scarf away and explained again that the scarf belonged to Amelia. Vicky did not say anything and went to lie on her bed.

2.30 pm. Vicky came back in the TV room, wearing Amelia's scarf. I told Vicky she must give the scarf back to Amelia and that her sweet ration for the day would be stopped.

¹⁶ The font Arial 10 is used throughout for the representation of typewritten medical and nursing notes.

2.40 pm. I went to Vicky's dormitory in response to someone having rung the alarm bell and found Vicky tying the scarf so tightly round Amelia's neck that Amelia was choking.

Consultant review 23.9.06

Vicky's stealing continues to give concern. She has no concept of items belonging to others. Her locker has to be examined daily to return articles stolen from other children and from staff. Vicky makes no protest when the items are taken from her, but she does take pains to keep both these and her own items secreted in her locker. She is reluctant to share her own items with others. She does protest volubly if she is punished for stealing. Neither punishment nor removing the stolen articles prevents her from doing the same thing again the next day.

Classroom notes 22.5.77

11.30 am. Vicky kept playing with her genitals in class. After three requests for her to stop had no effect, I removed her hand and said, "No." I did this several times but she continued as if I wasn't there. Eventually I had to remove her from the class as she was distracting the other children.

Nursing notes 16.2.78

7.15 pm. Vicky was playing with her genitals while watching TV. Mandy and Paula were present. Mandy began laughing but Paula went up to Vicky and said, "Stop it, you filthy bitch." Vicky did not respond or give any indication of having heard this. I went to intervene but before I could stop her, Paula slapped Vicky and called her a disgusting cow. I placed both girls in separate quiet rooms until suppertime.

As the notes progress Vicky begins to improve, much as Dr Soames reported. She develops the ability to converse in a limited way and her social skills expand.

A review in early 1978 records, "Vicky's incontinence has now disappeared completely. Masturbation or playing with her genitals occurs less often than formerly, so

we are hopeful that it will die out eventually. Stealing continues and we have so far been unable to instil any sense of right and wrong with respect to other people's property."

At this point the outlook seems positive but from then on Jed and I agree that the notes take on an increasing tone of failure and disillusionment. There are many more negative statements such as, "Vicky did not respond," "Vicky ignored my request," "We could not persuade Vicky to desist from"-

When we come back to the files after breaking for lunch, it soon becomes evident that Vicky's training and education are on a downward slide. Worse still the entries seem less concerned with her language development than with her failure to acquire the expected social skills, particularly with regard to socially unacceptable behaviour.

Nursing notes: 9.9.78

6.00 pm. Vicky went on a shopping trip with Nurse K and despite being constantly watched, was found to have several cosmetic articles and chocolate bars in her pockets when they returned to the car. Nurse K returned the items to the supermarket and explained to the manager who agreed to take no further action.

Classroom notes 15.10.78

1.30 pm. Vicky was seen masturbating in the playground in front of a group of older boys. This is a worrying development. I have made arrangements for a nurse to be with Vicky during class breaks.

Nursing notes 18.11.78

4.30 pm. Vicky disappeared from the lounge during afternoon free time. She was eventually discovered in the boys' bathroom with Billy T and it was obvious that some form of sexual

experimentation had been taking place. The incident was reported to Sister G and action to be taken will be discussed with Dr S.

Medical Review 20.1.79

Vicky is now twelve and a half and physical developmental signs indicate that she is approaching puberty. The onset of menstruation will pose a particular problem in view of her increasingly sexually provocative behaviour.

We need to consider the way forward immediately rather than wait for events to take their course. Accordingly, a conference has been called with Social Services and Vicky's legal representative in order to determine the best steps to be taken to safeguard Vicky's future welfare.

I scrabble through the next file to the conference and reports section with a sinking feeling in my gut and there is the decision.

We are all agreed that it is in Vicky's best interests for urgent action to prevent the possibility of her becoming pregnant. We have discussed various methods of contraception but these are unlikely to be feasible as Vicky is unable to understand the purposes of contraception and medical opinion is that she will be unlikely ever to be able to use self managed forms of prevention. The insertion of an IUD device is not considered to be suitable.

In view of the fact that Vicky already shows signs of being sexually active and our considered opinion that she is unlikely to develop the skills necessary to make informed decisions about choosing sexual partners or becoming a parent, and as she has no family to make choices on her behalf, we are unanimous in our decision to make application to the courts for an order for compulsory sterilisation, for her own protection, on the grounds that there are clear and beneficial therapeutic reasons for doing so.

“Look! Look at this!” I shove the file under Jed’s nose. My chair overturns as I blunder to the window. The view of the pleasant garden outside is blurry and it’s a few seconds before I realise that it is my eyes that are wet and not the glass.

“I can’t believe it!” My fist bangs the window and the glass rattles.

“Steady on, Buster.”

“How could they? What a bunch of bastards.”

“Calm down.” I can feel him looking at my back. “What did you expect them to do?”

How can he say this? I twist round to make sure it really is Jed speaking.

“Look, it says here, she was already sexually active. What do you think would have happened if they hadn’t acted? Add two and two, Jack.”

The futility of everything disarms me. The flat Fen landscape beyond the grounds, with its drab, harvested fields, is equally meaningless. He’s right.

It’s a physical pain, this rift between what I want, what I think should be, and what is ‘right’, expedient, the best option, whatever. All I can think is if such a thing happened to my daughter, how I would do anything to protect her. All I can see is Vicky trotting along, innocent at thirty-five, never mind when she was twelve and still without a champion.

Whatever holds me up feels like it’s running down, out of me into the floor.

“I know - but” - I sit down and cover my face. I smell Usha Singh’s perfume before I’m aware she’s in the room.

“Everything okay?” She looks at me, then at Jed.

“They sterilised her.” It comes out flat as the landscape.

“Yes. It was thought to be for the best.” She sounds like she’s talking about the choice of a good school, not a life changing decision.

“How would you like it to happen to you – or your daughter?” I can’t help glaring at her. How would she feel, she who is so pretty, so womanly that every cell in her body advertises a sure sensuality?

“I am not Vicky,” she says quietly. “What else could they do?” She’s looking strangely at me. This is not the reaction expected from a medical researcher. I need to pull myself together.

“It would not be the same for me.” She moves lightly round the desk, looks over my shoulder at the file. I’m distracted by her closeness. It separates me from Vicky, lets me get my composure back. “I would know. Vicky did not. She wouldn’t have known what was happening, or what it meant.”

“Does that make it better - or worse?” The words still come out bitter. I can’t believe that as a woman she agrees with this.

“There are always moral dilemmas in these situations, Jack. You know that as well as anyone.” Jed’s sending me eye signals to keep quiet. “At the end of the day they had to try and work out what was for the best. Even her solicitor agreed to it.”

I’m subsiding, giving way under the weight of their argument. I finger the file. It’s the last one. I turn up a note about the decision to transfer Vicky elsewhere and a list of possible new places for her.

“Where did they send her?” I feel exhausted, too tired to search through any more notes.

“She went to The Larches.” Dr Singh seems just as fresh as she was this morning. “It was a small fifteen bed rehab unit near Wisbech. They used it for a sort of halfway house to prepare people for moving into sheltered accommodation or residential homes.”

“Was?”

“It closed down a long time ago. I don’t know exactly when. It was long before I came here.”

“Do you know where she went after that?”

She shakes her head. “There’s nothing in the notes.”

“You mean there’s no record of what happened to her? What happened to the records from The Larches?”

She looks perplexed. “Our records end here. Vicky’s case attracted much media interest. Even after she left here, reporters, writers would turn up every so often. When she moved to The Larches, she was given a new identity, a new name. They expected her to have more contact with the outside world.”

“A new name?”

“It was deemed expedient for her own protection.”

“A new name? But when I” - I stop myself from giving the game away just in time.

“What was it?”

“I don’t know.” Her shrug is now intensely irritating.

“How can she have a different name when I know her as Vicky? That’s what she was called when I met her last week.” I can’t get my head round it.

The flat fields fly past the car window. Jed’s got the top down and the wind blows my words away so I have to shout.

“Did she actually say her name was Vicky?”

“Yes – well – I’m not sure.” I can’t remember her using her own name. “But the others called her Vicky. She must have told them it was her name.”

“Maybe they knew who she was. Maybe she told them.”

“No, I don’t think so.” I remember the conversation I had with Rita. “No, they didn’t know anything about her past. They just thought – well, it was obvious something was wrong. They thought she’d been in care. And she wouldn’t have been able to tell them.”

“Doesn’t she know who she is?”

The landscape reminds me of Lancashire, of the bus journey up to Skelmersdale from Liverpool. There are the same sprouts and cabbages, the same greying stalks of harvested wheat, the same wide fields and open sky. I think of Brow Lane Farm.

“She doesn’t know her history; either doesn’t know or can’t tell.” It sounds weird but I’m sure of it, thinking about her behaviour. “Oh, she remembers things, but they’re isolated happenings, good things or bad things; the taste of ice cream or being locked up by the police. I don’t know. Dr Soames noted that she had no sense of the past in her language.”

Jed stares at the road ahead. This is beyond his remit. He deals with cause and effect, treatment and cure. I’ve got no real evidence but just from being with Vicky I know she’s got little idea of who she is or where she’s come from. I can’t explain it but I know it’s so. Her memories are like the collection of possessions she kept in her cupboard. I wonder if she remembers me, if I’m tucked away in there to be fetched out at random.

Does it matter, this lack of history? I’ve got my neatly arranged past, but these last few days have shown me how inaccurate and selective it is; how I’ve let fictions drive my present, and as far as the future goes, I’ve no more idea than Vicky.

“Let’s stop for a drink,” The light’s failing and I’m flagging.

“Thought you’d gone to sleep. Thought you were dreaming of the lovely Usha.”

I'd forgotten all about her. "I was just thinking."

“Didn’t you ask for her phone number?”

“What do you think?” I give him a look, but I can’t help smiling.

We stop at a pub on the outskirts of Northampton and it's almost dark by the time we swing onto the M1 and join the rushing horde of drivers who all know where they're going.

— — — — —

sleep goodgirlmarjorie sle e e e e p

tv s l e e p

supper redwhite pink s l e e e

— — —

Two days after our visit to the Leadbetter Institute I'm still sunk in despair. After all my high hopes I've come to another dead end. I don't know where Vicky went or even what her official name is, so how can I begin to trace her?

I'm restless in the house. After Jed's gone to work I walk in the woods and think about Vicky's life. After years of total isolation in that shed, she was shut up in that institution

and then what? Abandoned and forgotten in some residential home? But Dr Singh said The Larches was a rehab unit. Maybe they found her a foster home or even a permanent family. Then how did she end up on the street?

It's begun to rain. I can hear it pattering on the leaf canopy but it's dry enough in here. From the edge of the trees I can see the rain falling in slanting lines on the field between the wood and the housing estate.

Someone is running across the field; a girl with a golden Labrador. The dog crashes in through the trees a few yards from where I'm standing. The girl follows. She's about eighteen, long blonde hair swinging round her head as she bends down to restrain the dog.

"Good boy Rinsky, good boy." She looks up and sees me, hesitates then smiles. "Oh, hello. Unexpected this rain, isn't it?" She waits for me to answer. She's uneasy because I'm a stranger.

"Let's hope it's only a shower. Nice dog." I make the appropriate response. She relaxes, looking at me casually then her expression changes, her eyes narrow.

"Aren't you – aren't you Dr Crabbe?"

The blood seems to drop down my body and I lean my hand against the nearest tree. It had to happen sometime, I suppose, but who the hell is she?

"Are you okay?"

I must look as shaky as I feel. She takes a step towards me. The Labrador is off nosing in the bushes.

"I'm Lucy, Lucy Mainwaring. Don't you remember me?" She pauses. "Angela's friend."

"Lucy?" I recognise the caramel eyes but that's all. I can see the two of them poring over magazines on Angela's bed, their heads together, one dark, one fair. At the same

time I remember the dream where Lucy was on the mortuary slab instead of Angela and my face must register my horror.

Her eyes widen, then she looks away towards the bushes.

“I’m sorry.” I struggle for words. “I didn’t recognise you. It’s been a long time. Your hair’s different.” Everything about her is different. Five years difference. She’s a woman now - just as Angela would have been. “It used to be dark.”

She grins. “Blondes have more fun.”

“I suppose so.” I can’t relate that trusting little girl to this confident, beautiful woman in front of me. She’s left Angela behind.

“I’ve been away a long time. I’ve just come to visit an old friend for a few days.”

“Oh.” She smiles vaguely. Does she know about Corinne, about me? Does she know the whole sordid story?

There’s a silence. We both watch the rain. She must know some of it because she doesn’t say anything, doesn’t mention that time and neither do I, but I can feel Angela as an awkward presence between us. The dog comes back and noses at her pockets.

“What do you want, Rinsky?” She finds a dog biscuit and gives it to him.

“You must have left school by now?” It’s a safe thing to say. Angela shrinks.

“Yes – I’ve just started a nursing degree. I’ve got my first placement, start the week after next.”

“That must be exciting. I hope you’ll enjoy it. Which hospital?” I wish the rain would stop so I can escape but it’s getting even heavier. This girl is like an open channel through which painful pasts and pictures of futures never to be come flooding.

“It’s not a hospital. It’s a community placement, a residential home called Meadowbank. Do you know it?”

I shake my head. I've no breath to speak.

"It's out near Pershore, bit of a way to travel but I've passed my test and Dad gave me a car for my eighteenth. Not new, but it gets me around."

Her voice falls away. I stopped listening after the word "Meadowbank." All I can think is, it could be, it must be.

"What kind of residential home?" My voice croaks.

"Usual kind of place. For the elderly." My heart sinks. "There are some younger people there too, people with learning disabilities I think. I went to have a look round the day before yesterday. It's a nice place, lovely gardens and the staff seem okay."

I'm itching to ask more but she'll think it's odd. Anyway, Vicky isn't called Vicky and Lucy won't know any of the residents yet.

"The rain's going off. I'd better be getting back." She pulls the hood of her jacket over her head. I want to detain her, ask her to meet me again, but I can't. I know as soon as she gets home she'll tell her mother and it'll be all over town that I'm back.

She snaps a lead on the dog and flashes me a perfect smile. "Nice to see you again, Dr Crabbe."

"Sure." I wave as she sets off and wait till she's a small figure in the distance before I go off in the opposite direction.

Back at the house I force myself to sit down with a coffee when all I want to do is to rush off to Pershore. My mind is a jumble; Lucy's blonde hair that was dark, the contrast with her brown eyes, the dream, the mortuary, Angela's eyes devoid of life, Corinne – chips of ice, black holes, Angela looking at me out of Vicky's face, stuck forever at thirteen years old.

I've got to go there now. I can't wait for Jed to come back. Meadowbank. Medoban. Perhaps it's not the right place. I search the study for the list Jed brought home but Meadowbank's not on it. Adrenalin runs through my body, making me want to run, to be on my way, but I don't even know where the place is.

I check the phone book. There are three Meadowbanks listed and the realisation that it's a common name pulls me up, but one of them is a residential home at Drake's Broughton. It's near enough to Pershore to be the one.

Something's scoffing in my head. What are the chances of her being there? Convenient, isn't it? She's been just around the corner all the time you've been here. But someone told me she went to the Midlands or was it down South? And Wisbech isn't so very far away. It's possible she's there and if it's possible I have to go and look.

I've got a feeling about it. What drew me to come here? What caused my path to cross with Lucy's today? It's as if I'm meant to find her and if I don't find her at this Meadowbank, I'll keep on looking till I do.

I've got the phone in my hand, meaning to ring Meadowbank when I realise I've got nothing prepared to say. I'm in no state to sit down and think of something plausible. I just want to go, I'll think of something on the way there. I rifle the tin of loose change that Jed keeps in the kitchen with a pang of conscience. He won't mind and I promise myself I'll find a way to pay him back.

The bus from Ronkswood takes me into town and there I catch another to Pershore which dawdles all over the place before getting on the A44 and putting on some speed. The scenery's lost on me because I'm picturing what I'm going to do when I get there. I could pretend to be looking for a place for a relative but that won't guarantee I can find out if Vicky is, or was, there.

I'm no nearer to a plan when the bus pulls up in Drake's Broughton. When I ask for Meadowbank, an elderly lady tells me it's not actually in the village but is on the main road back the way I've come. The bus must have passed it without me noticing.

It's a beautiful sunny day, more like August than October. It would be a pleasant walk in other circumstances. Now I'm almost there I feel sick and although I'm walking as fast as my hip will let me, each step seems to be in slow motion.

Meadowbank is set back from the road so I come upon it without warning. There's no sign of a building from the gate and if it wasn't for the signboard attached to the rail fence, I would have gone straight past. Even this gives nothing away, just the name, 'Meadowbank', no phone number, no explanation as to what it is, and this gives me an uncanny feeling, as if there's something here to be hidden away.

The drive curves off between twin lines of beeches and horse chestnut trees. My feet crunch on beechmast and conkers. When the house comes into view I realise I'm in plain sight of anyone looking out of the front windows.

It's a dilemma whether to march confidently up the drive or to creep round the bushes that border the wide lawns. It's a big house, not mansion or stately home proportions, but the sort of place that once belonged to a well-off merchant or small manufacturer.

I decide to brazen it out. I don't want to be caught skulking in the bushes, a sure fast-track to the police station and an end to my search. There are people dotted about on benches, mostly old ladies I see when I get closer. My heart gives a thump of alarm when I spot a few uniformed nurses, but no one gives me a second glance. They probably think I'm here to visit a relative.

I can't get close enough to see properly without attracting attention, but I look at each group, hoping to see a familiar shape, a certain turn of the head, a remembered tone of voice.

The front door is closed and there's a security keypad so there's no chance of just wandering in, but a gravel path leads round the side of the house to more grounds at the back. There's a small kitchen garden, three-quarters cleared and the rest filled with sprouts and leeks. I turn the corner and see a view of the Malvern Hills in the distance behind the house and in between the shiny ribbon of the M5 crammed with cars.

Instantly I'm back at Brow Lane Farm looking down from the hill to the M6. It stops me in my tracks and when I turn round, Vicky is sitting on a bench by the back door of the house.

It must be a mirage. I'm stuck in the past on the farm and I've materialised Vicky from my imagination, projecting her on this poor woman with the slumped posture and vacant eyes. I take a step closer and it *is* Vicky, even though she has freshly curled hair and an empty face. I can scarcely breathe.

"Vicky." It comes out in a whisper. She doesn't move a muscle.

"Can I help you?" The back door bangs and makes me jump. A middle-aged woman in a green overall and gardening gloves looks at me with a pleasant smile that doesn't mask the suspicion in her eyes. Vicky doesn't react. She might be carved in stone.

The woman shifts the empty basket on her arm, waiting for me to speak. I ransack my mind and suddenly a picture comes, something I saw on the bus.

"Is this the kennels? Marchbank? I'm looking for a place for my dog."

"Kennels? Does it look like kennels?" She jiggles her basket impatiently. "Why didn't you ring the doorbell?"

“I - well - I could see this part wasn’t the kennels. I thought it might be round the back. You know, like a separate enterprise. My friend recommended it. It’s for Goldie, my Labrador. I have to go away at short notice and my usual place is full up. My friend couldn’t remember the name properly. He thought it was Marchbank.”

“Hmph! Well, there’s no kennels here. This is Meadowbank. There’s a kennels up the road but it’s not called Marchbank, it’s something daft like Daisy’s Dog Hotel.”

“That must be it!” I flash my version of a winning smile. “Maybe the people who own it are called Marchbank.”

“I wouldn’t know.” She picks a pair of secateurs out of her basket and looks at a bed of chrysanthemums in the border.

I want so badly to speak to Vicky but I daren’t even look at her. She still hasn’t moved, doesn’t even seem to be aware of our presence, let alone recognise me, which is perhaps just as well or she’d give the game away.

“I’ll try there then. Thanks for your help.”

She gives me a curt nod and stands watching until I turn the corner back to the front of the house. There’s nothing I can do except leave. I walk along the road towards the kennels because I can’t think of anything else to do. I can’t think of anything. Any efforts to make sense of what’s happened and arrive at some organised strategy are completely overwhelmed by the enormity of finding her.

The kennels is called ‘Delightful Days for Dogs.’ I can hear a faint sound of barking.

There’s a bus stop just across the road. It’s time I went back to Jed’s. There’s nothing I can do here now and Vicky doesn’t look like she’s going anywhere.

sun

birdsing

thirsty

flowers

tired

man newdoctorman

tirednotalk

valerie
greengloves

hotsun

thirstytired

flowers
cut
cry

want
go sleep

marjorie
go sleep

Chapter Five

By the time I get back my mind has cleared. I know exactly what I'm going to do. The plan arrived in my head as if someone else had thought it out and delivered it to me. Will it work? It's got to work.

I have to wait till around four thirty so I make myself an omelette and devour it, suddenly realising how hungry I am. Now I'm on course I'm utterly calm. At four twenty eight I key the number.

"Meadowbank." The voice is professional but friendly.

"Hello. My name's Jim Wallace, from the School of Health Studies. Could I speak to whoever's in charge there, please?"

"Mrs Mitchell? I think she's still here. I'll put you through."

"Claire Mitchell." This is the voice of a busy person.

"Mrs Mitchell, I don't think we've met. My name's Jim Wallace, from the School of Health Studies at the university. I'm Lucy Mainwaring's supervisor. I wondered if I could pop in and have a chat about her placement?"

"Well, Mr Wallace-" she sounds puzzled.

"Doctor."

“Sorry Dr Wallace. Janet Russell usually comes to discuss student placements, in fact, let me just check – yes she has an appointment here next Wednesday. We’ve another student coming as well as Lucy, and Janet is coming to discuss them both.”

“Yes I know, but unfortunately Janet’s been called away due to family illness. I’m covering her appointments until she comes back. I’m afraid I can’t make Wednesday, I’ve an important meeting all day.”

“Oh. Well, I suppose we can make it another day. Let me see. What about two o’clock on Tuesday?”

“Erm-” I flick the pages of the phone book. “No, I’m sorry I’m booked up on Tuesday. I could manage first thing Monday morning.”

“Mornings are very busy for us. It’s not really convenient.”

“I do appreciate that Mrs Mitchell but it’s the only time I can get there. I’m afraid it’s a bit of an emergency situation with Janet going off so suddenly. My diary’s full all week and Lucy’s due to start with you the following week.” I let my voice tail away.

“Yes,” she says irresolutely. “Oh, I suppose I can fit it in. It’ll have to be nine o’clock sharp.”

“That’s fine. Thank you so much for making the time. I’ll see you then.” I ring off before she can change her mind. There’s no way she’ll be able to check up on me at this time on a Friday afternoon and if my plan works, by the time she finds out the truth, Vicky and I will be long gone.

Next, I search Jed’s garage for the things I will need – a decent torch, wire and bolt cutters and gardening gloves. Among some abandoned bike gear I find a black silk balaclava that might come in useful. I can’t wait to get back there, but then it occurs to me that tonight is too soon. My preparations might be discovered before Monday. Much

better to wait till tomorrow. I put the packed bag away and wait for Jed to return. It's difficult not to fill the time with thinking of all the things that could go wrong. If only I could fast-forward to Monday. I can't concentrate on TV or music. I wish Jed would come back. I want to share my news. When he hasn't arrived by seven thirty I start to fret. Just before eight he rings.

"Won't be back till late Buster. Got a last minute call out and I'm taking Sarah to the pictures. Get yourself something out of the freezer will you? We're eating-"

I cut him short "Jed, I found her."

"Vicky?" His voice drops in surprise. I can barely hear him above the clatter and chatter of the place he's ringing from.

"She's in a home near Pershore. I've been there today. I saw her, Jed."

"That's great." He sounds uneasy.

"I can't believe it. All this time she's been so close."

"It's great news. Look, I have to go."

"I'm going back for her Jed, I'm going to get her out."

"Buster don't. Look, don't do anything. We'll talk about it when I get back."

I heat a frozen lasagne, make coffee, watch TV, but all the time I'm planning how I'm going to kidnap Vicky. Can I really impersonate my former self convincingly enough to carry it off? I get so involved in creating and replaying scenarios in which I charm Claire Mitchell into letting me take Vicky away, that I don't notice the time passing until I hear Jed's key in the door. It's after midnight. One look at his face tells me he's not happy about my news.

"Thought you'd be staying out all night." I give him a tomcat smile, trying to dispel the tension I can already sense between us.

“Fat chance after what you told me. I’ve been worrying about it all evening.” He takes off his jacket and reaches in the kitchen cupboard for the bottle of Glenmorangie.

“Sorry to ruin your date. I suppose you talked it all over with Sarah.”

“That’s unfair, Jack. You should know I would never discuss your affairs with anybody else.” He puts two glasses on the table, but I push mine away and get up to put the kettle on.

“So, you found Vicky.” He puts his feet up. “What happened?”

“It was weird. I was out walking this morning, in the woods and I met Lucy – do you remember, Marianne and Tom’s daughter?” I tell him the story except for the bit about ringing up Claire Mitchell.

“That’s amazing. From Liverpool she ends up here and so do you. Are you sure it’s her?”

“I saw her.” I remember my momentary doubt. “I didn’t get to talk to her. She didn’t know me, or she didn’t appear to. She didn’t move. She just sat there.”

“Probably medicated to the eyeballs.” He gives me a wry smile and pours half a tumbler of whisky. “How did she get to Liverpool? Did you find out any more about her?”

“I didn’t talk to anyone, except the woman working in the garden and she wasn’t going to tell me anything. I couldn’t just up and say, “I’m Dr Crabbe and I want to know about Vicky Appleton, could I? And, anyway, I don’t know what they’re calling her now, do I?”

“Okay, now you know she’s safe you don’t need to worry about her any more do you? Maybe you can get on with your own life now, take some steps back to the life you ought to be living. Maybe this whole thing has been a good experience for you.”

What is he talking about? I put my coffee down on the table. “You don’t think I want to go back to – that?”

He shrinks back from the horror that I know is in my voice and on my face.

“Look, I know you put yourself out to help me. I know I’ve been taking advantage of your kindness and your lifestyle for the last week or so and, believe me, I’m grateful, but the past is over and done with, Jed. I can’t go back to what I was. I just want to get her out of there and be on my way.”

He looks completely bewildered, and hurt. “But when you came here, I thought what you really wanted was to come back. I thought you’d realised-”

“What I was missing? No, Jed. I’ve been telling you all along I didn’t want that. You haven’t been listening.”

“But it’s such a waste, of your life, your talents.” He knocks the whisky back in one gulp and pours another.

“It’s up to you what you think. All I know is I’m not leaving Vicky to rot in that place.”

“You’re talking crazy! Think straight man. You can’t get her out and even if you could, what then?”

“I’m going to get her out Jed.”

“How? Going to walk up and knock on the door, ‘Excuse me, I’ve come to take Vicky away’?”

“I’ve got it planned.”

“Well you can count me out. Helping you find out about her is one thing. Kidnapping her out of state care is a different kettle of fish. I’ve told enough lies already for you.”

“I wouldn’t dream of-”

“Jesus Jack, I don’t want to know.” He gets up and slams out. The door to his room bangs shut and after a few seconds The Who burst out shouting, ‘My Generation’. He’s taken the whisky bottle with him.

I lie down on the bed in his spare room and nothing seems right. I think of all the cold, damp doorways I’ve slept in with my hip groaning and complaining, all the grotty hostel rooms I’ve shared with the most unpredictable social outcasts. It’s taken meeting Vicky to make me realise that instead of dropping out of an environment I wasn’t good enough to be in, I’ve dropped into another world that operates in different, but equally valuable ways. I don’t know which is right or wrong, I only know what I can and can’t do, and I can’t go back to the comfortable world of Dr. Jack Crabbe.

wakeup marjorie

sun yes day look garden

wakeup goodgirlmarjorie

openwindow
openwindow
openwindow
openwindow window shut no

thirsty thirsty thirsty tea and toast
yes

medication water thirsty water

want coke

want

valerie garden

marjorie sit

goodgirl yes

tired

Saturday morning I'm back at Meadowbank but this time I take the risk of creeping through the bushes. It's as I'd hoped. Vicky's sitting in the same place by the back door. She's got the same vacant look on her face, staring ahead but not looking at anything. Her hands are limp in her lap.

The security is not as bad as I'd expected. There are cameras of course, but there is only simple link wire fencing down both sides of the back garden and a thick hedge at the bottom end. Beyond the fence on the side of the garden where Vicky's sitting is a small copse of Scotch pines.

No point in hanging around for long, it's too risky in the daylight and if that dragon in the gardening gloves comes out and sees me, my plans will be shot to pieces. I want to call out to Vicky but I mustn't and she looks so absent it would probably be pointless anyway. She doesn't even look unhappy or despairing, just not there. I can no longer see Angela looking out from her eyes.

When I get back, Jed has gone out and that's how it goes for the rest of the weekend as we carefully avoid each other. I suppose that now he realises we're on separate paths he doesn't know what to do about me. I'm pretty sure he won't tell anyone about my plans, but he'll probably want me to move on. That suits me anyway. I don't want to put him in a compromising situation.

On Sunday morning I visit Angela's grave for the last time. I'm able to do this without fear this time. Angela is not there and this is a symbolic farewell. I even feel peaceful but how or why this is I don't know. Nothing has really changed, yet everything is different. There is a fresh bunch of carnations on the grave and last week's chrysanths have disappeared.

"It's okay sweetheart." I am not talking to the grave but to Angela inside my head. Now I'm looking at things from my new perspective, perhaps I can open up the good memories, the good things in my life that she represents, rather than pushing her image away with horror.

In the late afternoon, I travel to Pershore again. I want to check that Vicky's still around, maybe sitting on her bench but I'm frightened of being seen and remembered so I get a sandwich and a Coke at a pub in the village and settle down to wait. I try to plan where I will take Vicky when I get her out. I can't take her back to Jed's but at the moment I can't think of anything except tomorrow morning. Something will turn up. What did Mary Appleton say? "Consider the lilies."

At last it starts to get dark and I can make my way back to Meadowbank. The sun is almost set by the time I get there and the trees along the drive are black and stark against the last bright stripes as the sun slides down through bands of cloud.

Lights are on in the windows but the curtains are all drawn. Where is she? Maybe she can sense me the way she sensed what was happening to Peter. If only I could clear my thoughts, maybe I could reach her, but my mind is cluttered with plans and all the things that could go wrong. What if it rains? What if she's not there? What if someone else is there with her?

When it's so dark I won't be seen, I cut the wire fence, just enough to slip through, making sure I pick a spot close enough for a quick escape but out of sight behind a bush and away from the security lights and cameras. Vicky's bench is empty and the peace of the garden is broken only by the last chirpings of birds settling down for the night. I stop to hide my bag under a heap of pine needles in the copse on the adjoining farmland before making my way to catch the last bus back to Worcester.

When I let myself into the house, Jed is in the lounge, watching a re-run of *Spinal Tap*. He's got a fresh bottle of Glenmorangie and he sees me looking at it, but neither of us can say what we're thinking.

"There's some curry in the fridge. It's home made," he shouts over the soundtrack. I'm too keyed up to eat but it's a peace offering. I can't afford not to accept so I warm it up and take it in on a tray. Music fills the space between us and he watches me while I eat then he swings his feet off the couch and fills his glass.

"This plan of yours. When is it going to happen?"

"Tomorrow." My look dares him to try to change my mind.

"And then?"

I shrug. "I'm not asking you to help me. You've done enough already. I won't be coming back here."

"Where will you go?"

"It's best if you don't know."

"Jesus Christ! I can't believe you're really contemplating doing this. What if it all goes wrong? You'll go to jail. You'll be struck off!"

"So? I've not kept my registration up anyway."

He stares at me like I just landed from Mars.

“I thought I knew you, Jack, better than I know anybody, but I don’t. I don’t know you at all.”

“I’ve changed. After Angela died I didn’t want to be myself. I hated myself, yes all those years I was lost, maybe you’re right, I could have learned to love myself again, forgive myself, come back, but now, because of Vicky, I see all this differently. The way I used to live with Corinne, with you, okay, it’s what most people want, but it’s not the only way. It boxes you in, shuts you off from yourself. I don’t know what it’s all about, Jed.”

I can see he doesn’t know what I’m talking about and I can’t explain. Words aren’t enough.

“All those years on the streets, I’ve been learning other ways of living. But it wasn’t till I met Vicky and saw for myself how she thinks, how she is, that I realised the value of it. I thought she could help me to go back to the past, those things that were so painful I couldn’t face remembering, but now I’m not so sure I need to do that.”

Jed’s face is white. He reaches for the Glenmorangie. I suddenly think of Mabel with her bottle of wine.

“Whatever happens, I shan’t come back here. I wouldn’t want to involve you.”

“You’ll need money.”

I shake my head. “I might need to borrow some clothes.”

He puts his hands over his face and when he takes them away again I see how tired he looks. “Call it off Jack, it’s a crazy scheme.”

“I can’t. Not even for you.”

“You’re fucking nuts. I’m going to bed.” He stands up and rubs the back of his neck.

“Maybe you’ll see sense in the morning.”

When he's gone to his room, I wash the dishes and his empty glass. This time he's left the whisky bottle behind.

In the morning, when I come out of the shower he's gone, even though it's barely seven o'clock. Maybe this is the best way. I choose a dark suit from his wardrobe and put on a silk tie that feels so alien after all these years that I have to crush the desire to rip it off again.

On the kitchen table there's an envelope with £100 inside and Jed's mobile number scrawled on the outside. After a moment's hesitation I put it in my pocket. Maybe someday I'll be able to repay his kindness. I leave his front-door key on the table with a sense of desolation. It's unlikely that we will meet again.

I arrive at Meadowbank at ten to nine. All the way I've been watching the gathering clouds and praying that it won't rain. What will I do if Vicky is nowhere around when I get there?

Think positive. It's going to work, as long as that woman in the green overall doesn't answer the door. Catching sight of myself in the hall mirror as a nurse lets me in, I have to admit that I look the business. I just hope it's enough. If anyone asks to see my ID my goose will be cooked.

I'm left sitting in the hall watching nurses and patients coming up and down the stairs. Food smells and the clatter of dishes identify the dining room across from my seat. I desperately want to go and see if Vicky is in there, but I daren't move and after a minute or two Claire Mitchell appears and invites me to her office.

"Good of you to be so prompt. I've got a meeting at ten so we'll have to be brief."

"That suits me too."

"This is the student pack that we use here." She gives me a sheaf of forms.

“I’m sure you’ll find Lucy a very able student. She’s only just begun her studies but she has excellent A level results and a good report from her sixth-form college.”

“Well, she’ll only be here for observation at first. We don’t want to frighten her off.” She laughs, a tinkly little sound for such a business-like woman. “The other student, Paul Wright – he’s a second year?”

“Oh yes. He’s had a year’s experience on the wards so I’m sure you’ll find him very useful, he’s a pleasant lad. Of course we’ll be setting his objectives with you once he commences the placement.”

“I’ve not met Paul yet, but Lucy seems a very competent girl.”

I waffle about the respective merits of Lucy and Paul without letting her get a word in. I just hope they live up to the praise I’m giving them. When I see her beginning to look at her watch, I wind down. “Well, we’re both busy people, and everything seems quite satisfactory – if you’re happy?”

“Fine with me. We like having students here.”

“I would like to know a little more about the home. Maybe you could spare a few minutes to show me round?”

“I don’t really have time right now, Dr Wallace, but you’re welcome to have a look round. I’ll ask Nurse Johnson to go with you. She’s been here a long time, she knows everything there is to know about Meadowbank.”

Nurse Johnson looks like she should be retired, but I can tell as soon as she looks at me that she’s made of steel. She leads me up the stairs and shows me the neat bedrooms decorated in restful colours, the ensuite shower rooms, even the linen cupboards. Downstairs there’s a typical TV lounge with Parker Knoll armchairs and artificial flowers. A few residents wander in from the dining room.

"This is the activity room." Nurse Johnson throws the door open and startles a middle-aged man with Down's Syndrome who is working on a watercolour painting.

"This is Robin. Robin likes painting, don't you Robin?" He looks at me and grunts.

"And this is the kitchen." She shepherds me along the corridor and I almost stop dead as I see Vicky getting a bottle of Coke out of a fridge.

"Some of these people seem rather young to be in a rest home for the elderly." I pray Vicky won't give me away but she shows no sign of recognition.

"It's not a rest home as such. It is mostly for elderly people but specialises in care for those with what we call learning disabilities. We only take people on recommendation from Social Services so we do get some younger cases. It all depends on where there are beds these days, doesn't it?"

The moment is coming but Vicky is inside, not out. I keep willing her to go to the back door but she's intent on her drink.

"Take poor Marjorie here. She's been with us for donkey's years. She was here even before me and I've been here twenty years."

"What's the matter with her?" I lower my voice.

"No one really knows. She's been here so long she's like part of the furniture. There's no need to whisper, Doctor, she doesn't understand much of what you say. Although, having said that, she disappeared a couple of months ago while we were on a day out to Weston-Super-Mare and we only got her back last week. The police found her in some kind of squat - in Liverpool of all places. How she got there and what she'd been doing nobody knows. Doesn't bear thinking about, does it? And she can't tell us poor thing. Put that in a glass, Marjorie, there's a good girl."

Vicky turns towards the back door and looks at it like someone in a dream.

“In the glass, dear.” The nurse takes the bottle from her and pours out the drink. Vicky accepts it without any change of expression. “She’s being kept under sedation for the moment until she’s settled down again but she’s never very responsive at the best of times.”

There’s a sudden altercation in the hall and she breaks off. “Oh excuse me a moment, it’s those two again, honestly they’re always squabbling.” She shouts from the door, “Rebecca! Rebecca? Come and get Millie and Jane.”

She turns back to me. “That new girl. She’s never around when she’s supposed to be on duty.” The noise escalates. “I’m sorry. I’ll have to see to them.”

“It’s okay. I have to go anyway. I’ll see myself out.” I step towards the back door and she nods with relief before disappearing into the hall.

“Vicky! Vicky! It’s Jack. Come on.” She’s still staring at the door with the glass of Coke in her hand. “Come on.” I tug at her arm and try to take the Coke from her. She doesn’t pull away but she hangs on to the glass with a stronger grip than she looks capable of. How am I going to get her out?

She turns to look at me as if I’ve dragged her away from somewhere else. Yes, now she will recognise me, she’ll respond and come with me.

“Doctor,” she says and there’s no intonation in her voice, no recognition in her eyes.

I put on my most professional air and seize her by the arm. “Marjorie. Outside. Now,” I say loudly and firmly.

It works. She turns like a lamb and lets me push her towards the door, but just as she goes outside, a woman in a green overall comes into the room pushing a trolley full of dirty dishes.

For a second, my heart stops but it's not the same woman I saw on Friday and this one gives me a quick but incurious smile before starting to unload the plates into a dishwasher.

I puff myself up and consult my wrist even though I've no watch. "Would you thank Nurse Johnson for showing me round? I really can't wait for her to come back."

She nods as I leave. Vicky is standing outside the back door, just out of sight from the window.

"Come on." I pull her and, thank God, she follows me without protest. It's like clockwork. Within seconds I've got her through the fence and then it's only a few moments while I pick up my bag, before we're on our way.

I try to hurry Vicky along. My hip's screaming and I'm too breathless to talk as we dodge through the pine trees. I just pray I've timed the bus right and no one notices Vicky's missing till we have time to get clear.

doorgardenbushesfence

coldtrees shadow

doctorman run marjorie run vicky run novicky goodgirlmarjorie

run yes run goodgirl run

coke

thirsty

tired no more doctorman no more run stopit

Once we're on the bus I still can't relax. I pull Vicky to the back seat and I keep peering out of the rear window, expecting to see the police in hot pursuit. There aren't many other passengers and no one takes any notice of us even though we're both breathless.

After a bit I try to settle down, brush the pine needles off Jed's suit and pick them out of Vicky's hair. She's still barely reacting, despite being dragged through the bushes and practically thrown on the bus. This isn't the Vicky I know.

She just stares at the back of the seat in front of her but when I touch her hair she turns towards me and something changes in her eyes. Now she knows me.

"Thirsty," she says. "Coke." That's all. She still hasn't recognised me. I hadn't planned for this. What if something's happened to permanently change her? This is silly. I know it's the medication. Once it wears off she'll be okay.

We need to get as far away as possible quickly. When we arrive safely in Worcester, I propel Vicky to Foregate Street station and buy two tickets to Birmingham. It's an extravagance but we could be hours trying to hitch a lift and getting ourselves noticed into the bargain. Bless you Jed, for leaving the money.

“Want Coke,” is the only thing Vicky says and I buy two bottles to keep her quiet during the journey. I wonder if she’s ever been on a train before. Perhaps it’s a good thing that she’s so sedated, otherwise she might have caused a scene.

Thankfully, she falls asleep as soon as the train gets going. The last thing I need is her attracting attention from the other passengers. I’m uncomfortable in Jed’s suit, it’s rumpled and sticky with all the panic I’ve sweated into it. I take the pink tie off and drape it round Vicky’s neck without waking her, then I sneak off to the toilet to change into my own clothes. They’ll be looking for someone in a suit, not an old tramp in sweat pants.

All the time I’m in the toilet, I worry about her, but she’s still there, fast asleep when I get back. After a few moments of sitting, staring out of the train window, panic starts to set in. What am I doing? I’m throwing away any chance I ever had of going back to ‘normal’ life. The train goes faster and faster and my racing thoughts match its speed. What I’m doing is criminal, irrational, illogical. The words beat time with the wheels. I think of Jed’s horrified face, then I look at Vicky. She’s serene in the middle of all this.

As if she senses my thoughts, she awakes and looks round. She’s unperturbed by this awful step I’ve taken. I can’t go back. I’ve burnt my bridges, but when I look at her, I know I’m doing the right thing for us both.

At Birmingham, I stop short at the station exit. A row of police cars is parked on the station approach. Are they waiting for us? There’s no sign of any policemen.

My heart thumps as I drag Vicky back into the station and up the escalator to the Pallasades shopping centre. There is anonymity here, in the crowds and I start to relax. For a while we wander aimlessly, while I try to think what to do, until I see two policemen walking purposefully towards us. I steer Vicky quickly to the nearest staircase

and out into the street. I daren't look over my shoulder until we get outside, but no one seems to be following us.

Outside, it's begun to drizzle. I buy Vicky a change of clothes and a rainproof jacket in a charity shop. We eat lunch in Mcdonalds. She smiles when I give her the carton containing her burger and fries. It's the first sign of life she's shown and I'm encouraged. I watch her eat and remember the last time we were in Mcdonalds, in Liverpool, less than three weeks ago.

mcdonalds cheeseburgerfriescoke

fizztickle hotfries

mcdonalds

police medoban marjorie

no

ray rita kindi peter black

nomore

nomorepeter

greybeard yes oldgreybeard

"Hermitjack,"she says and delight spreads through me like warm honey.

“Vicky. You’re back.” I want to touch her, take her hand, but I don’t. She reaches out and strokes Jed’s pink tie. “Doctor,” she says and her smile falters. “No go Medoban.” She looks anxiously at me.

“No, no more Medoban.” I try to sound confident. “Not if I can help it.”

To escape the rain, I take Vicky into the Bullring but I’m constantly looking for patrolling police.

Vicky turns and turns, staring in delight at the mirrored lights in the glass walls and ceilings. Although she still seems sleepy, she’s definitely coming back to her old self. Her wonder makes me smile, despite my anxiety. Suddenly, I see the mall with her eyes, a flying mixture of colours, smells, textures. I see a muddled vision of dresses, shoes, bags, toys, cosmetics, exotic foods, electrical items, all heaped in an Aladdin’s cave full of jewelled lights and shiny surfaces, all totally without pattern or meaning.

She starts to pull me to different shop windows, making little squeaks of delight. She’s making me nervous, people are turning to look at us. It’s time to move on, but where?

Maybe we can stay in Birmingham for a while until I can work out what to do next. It’s big and anonymous enough but my gut feeling is to get away. They will know by now that’s she’s missing and that I’m not who I said I was. They’ll be looking for Marjorie and Dr Wallace. They’re bound to ask Lucy but there’s no reason why she should connect Dr Wallace with me. I hope not, for Jed’s sake.

It’s not safe to stay here and when I think about it, it’s obvious where we have to go.

Outside on the street, the rain has stopped, and the sun is shining on the lunchtime crowds. It’s so like the day we walked through Liverpool, I can imagine us back there as if the events of the past few weeks never happened, but then I was a different person, trying to lose my past whereas now I can live in the present.

I check the money Jed gave me. I think there'll be enough. On the way back to the railway station I buy a couple more Cokes for Vicky. In the shop she looks at me with Angela's eyes. She doesn't ask where we're going, barely says anything but I can see a difference in her. She's becoming more alert, watching people go by.

At the station, I steer Vicky through another entrance, where there are no police cars. I'm hoping their presence is a normal thing, that they're not specifically looking for us, but I'm on pins while I buy the tickets, and during the time we have to wait for the next train.

In the carriage she doesn't speak except to ask for chocolate when the trolley comes by and after a while she falls asleep again. I could sleep too, I'm dropping with nervous exhaustion and I feel safer with every mile we travel away from the Midlands but I can't doze off. My mind keeps running on the possibilities. Maybe the rail staff have been alerted to watch for us. Maybe the railway police will get on at the next station.

Each time the train stops, Vicky wakes up and looks around. Each time she does this, I hold my breath. Don't talk, Vicky, please don't talk. People will notice, remember us. I ply her with Coke and chocolate and as soon as the train starts its rhythmic beat, she dozes off again.

It's after four when we get to Wigan but we pick up a bus to Upholland right away. Vicky plays with the pink tie, sniffing it as if there are traces of me or Jed on it. She doesn't seem concerned about where we're going as long as it's not to Meadowbank.

They might look for us in Liverpool but they certainly won't be looking for us here. The little village seems almost friendly and we go across to the chip shop on the crossroads and get chips and I pick up a couple of sandwiches and yet more Coke for later. There's not much left of Jed's money but tomorrow's another day.

We walk past the housing estate where Vicky’s mother once walked and suddenly horror strikes through me as I realise what I’m doing. Why am I bringing Vicky back here to the scene of her early torment? Is it some prurient desire to see if she will remember? Am I no better than the scientists with their funded research?

I can’t explain it but it’s something I have to do. Somehow I know it’s necessary to us both.

Vicky seems happy walking with me. She looks at everything, the houses, fields, the dry stone walls but she shows no recognition at all. When we come to the turn to Brow Lane, darkness is beginning to gather under the tunnel of trees. Vicky turns to me and her face now is uneasy, almost questioning.

This is your history, Vicky. I wonder what you’ll make of it. Will you remember? Maybe it’s something she needs to know as much as I do.

trees	“Down here Vicky. Don’t be scared. It’s okay.”	What is this feeling? Is it the end of the day, the end of the journey, or something peculiar to this place?
hermitjack sad		
birdsing sad		
no sun cold	“Come on, it’s not far.”	
yes cold trees talk		Shadows finger the long hours before night while life winds down, creatures getting ready to sleep.
vickynotmarjorie		
smell earth leaves		
flowers		

rabbits on grass one rabbit “Give me your hand -

two rabbits squeak squeak Vicky – your hand. Over

hello vicky notmarjorie the gate. Come on, I’ll
help you.

“Up here now. Be careful,
there are holes, and rocks.

“Come on Vicky, nearly
there now.”

trees leaves listen

hermitjack tired

no breath

“I’ll be glad to have a rest.

I don’t know about you.”

The gate bars the way
blackly and up there, up
the path, the grass, the
bushes seem taller, a last
burst of growth before
winter death.

Is it me, or everything
round me, holding its
breath? Not a rustle of
leaves, no breeze but the
sounds of our passage
crack and crush the
silence. When we stop at
the top I can just hear the
brook at the bottom
trickling over the stones.

I stop to catch my breath.

To my right the
remembered shape, the
dark hulk of the house.

She’s stopping too but

black here black
house no top no
light sad sadhouse

“hermitjack give vicky
coke.”

“Here, it’s the last one.
Don’t drink it all now.”

house fall down

stones

tired listen

stopit stopit shutup

stopit

nomore

listen house

she’s just staring at the
house – as if she’s seen it
before? Does she
remember it?

Thirsty again. When will
she stop being thirsty?

She must feel
something here. Even I can
feel the sombreness here.
It’s death and life and the
rotting house slowly
slipping, while unseen
creatures scuttle about and
the moon sailing up as if to
say everything just goes on
regardless and we’re just
two more animals
scurrying down here.

That spot she’s standing
on, maybe that’s the place,
yes, there’s a heap of
rotten wood. That’s why

holes

sing

hungry

thirsty

hungry

thirsty

hungry

thirsty

“no more sadwoman.”

“What?”

“What did you say?”

“Vicky – tell me.”

“sadblackwoman nomore
nomore.”

wood

she’s staring, staring at
nothing but would she
know? Would she ever
have known, back then? If
you never knew the
company of others, the
warmth of love, a
comfortable home. If you
knew nothing but the
scraps you’d always eaten,
the cold you’d always felt,
would you feel deprived,
unhappy, angry, sad?
Did I hear right? No more
sad woman? Is that what
she said?
She’s looking at the hole
where the farmhouse door
once was, the place where
Jimmy Atherton told me
Mary’s body was found.
She remembers. Or does
she just see?

nomore
broken
beetles
no
sleep
vicky
tired

Those rotten planks –once
they were strong. Once
they framed her world.

“vicky go sleep”
“Soon. What about the sad
woman?”
“nomore”
“You mean your mother.
Vicky, she was your
mother. This is where you
were born.”
“mother mothercat
motherbook”

motherbook come back
hermitjack
give vicky

“Here. Here they are.”
“motherbook”
“That’s right. Your
mother’s book. *Your*

The books! They’re in my
bag.
She can’t read. How does
she know?
Someone’s told her.

	mother.”	Someone’s told her what mother means.
	“mother book mother baby”	Look at the way she touches it, strokes the covers.
motherbook	“Your mother, Vicky. You were the baby.”	Someone’s told her but she doesn’t understand. She’s clutching the book. Does she know what’s in it? Has someone read it to her? Would she understand? Maybe someone’s read it to her, watered it down, changed the bad bits to make a pretty fairy story. It would be cruel to tell her the truth.
sadmotherwoman		
blackwoman		
sadblack		
redbook smell redbook		
mansmell		
hermitjacksmell		
badbook		But she’s touching the other book too and sniffing at it. She stiffens. It’s as if it’s burning her fingers.
blackredbook		
sadbadblackwoman		She opens it, turning the

no

stopit no

hurtvicky

no

no

pages as if they were dirty,
unpleasant. Everything
about her looks taut, as if
she's getting ready to run
away.

Maybe it was a mistake,
giving her the books. I'll
try to get her settled down
for the night.

"Come on Vicky, over
here. Put the books in my
bag.

Groundsheet, sleeping bag,
plastic sheet. Should keep
us warm enough.

"Want a sandwich?
Chicken or tuna?

"We'll be okay if it
doesn't rain. I'll make
some tea."

In the light of the stove her
face holds deep shadows.
She's staring out across the
plain, every muscle taut.
She's like a statue,
sandwich poised halfway

"What is it Vicky? What's
the matter?"

to her mouth. Suddenly
I'm cold. I can feel the
house looming behind me.

dark

hills

fields

orangelights

orangelights

orangelights

broken beetles wood

angry

woman stopit shutup

yes shutup rain

on hills snow

yellowfields greenfields

sun

hungry

thirsty

shutup shutup

cupboard

no more

“orangelights vicky

see sadwoman hungry

thirsty nomore stones trees

wood

wood”

“eggs”

What’s she staring at?

There’s nothing there. The

hairs rise on my neck.

Then I see it. It’s the

motorway.

It’s the most I’ve ever

heard her say.

What does it mean? Is it a

view she used to see? How

much does she remember?

Eggs?

Vicky lies down. Her face

is a mask, turned away

from me so she can stare

out at the plain.

I can see the lights of

the cars on the motorway.

They make me think of the

noscared hermitjack

nohurtangela nohurtvicky

nomore

no want see silvercar

no

hermitjack want see

want see angela

no no red bad red

sunyellowshine

redbadblack

silver

poorbird

“silver car.”

“What?”

“silvercar hermitjack
angela”

“hermitjack red angry
corinne angela want horse
ride horse
hermitjackangela ride car

Jaguar and the way I was
so drawn to Vicky to get
the answers to those
missing moments. Now it
doesn’t seem to be so
important, I’ve already
made my peace with
Angela.

Despite everything, I
feel comfortable lying here
with Vicky next to me. It’s
warm and I feel quite at
home here, as if the farm
accepts me, because I’ve
brought her home.

She turns to face me
and Angela’s eyes look at
me gravely.

	nice horse in field angela
poor	like horse angela say look
	dad
noangelahermitjacknono	big bird come bird want
stopitstopit	food food in field bird see
	food yes hungry big tail
	bird fly fast car drive fast
	hermitjack see horse bird
	see food no stopit
	stopitstopitstopit"

And I remember, the late afternoon, the sun dipping and blinding me, how cross I was because Corinne hadn't come back to take Angela for her riding lesson. I wanted a few hours peace before evening surgery but Angela nagged for me to take her.

I remember the ponies in the field as we drove out to the stables. She cried out, "Look Dad," and then there was the glare of the sun as I glanced away from the road and the thump on the windscreen, the smear of blood and feathers, before I realised what was happening. I remember the screaming, Angela screaming, the way it tore into my brain, then nothing.

"It's okay, it's okay." I hold Vicky and rock her till she stops screaming and her body starts to soften. We stay like this for a long time, until she's quiet. There's a complete feeling inside me, as if a final piece of the jigsaw has dropped into place.

When I open my eyes, Vicky's asleep. I lie dreaming about staying here, building a home for Vicky, after all it is her property, but would they let her stay? We'd soon be discovered here, small villages have eyes everywhere, everybody knows everybody else and the Miss Thorntons and Jimmy Athertons don't miss a trick.

Maybe I'm only thinking about what I'd like. How do I know Vicky would want to stay here? I'm making decisions for her just like everybody else does. Maybe she'd want to sell the farm and spend the money on Coke and chocolate. I wonder how she lived those few weeks on her own before I met her. Maybe she's tougher than I think. She must have been tough to survive all that time in that shed.

I don't remember falling asleep or dreaming until Vicky wakes up screaming and struggling sometime in the night. "No no Medoban! No Martin, stop it! Stop it!" I hold her flailing arms, feel the warmth of her body close against mine, till she stops fighting and her breathing tells me she's asleep again. Christ! What did they do to her in that place?

Early morning a soft rain wakes us. I set up the stove to make tea with the last of our water. Vicky goes off in the bushes and I look round for some branches to rig up a shelter with the plastic sheet but when she comes back she points to the path. She's telling me it's time to go and she's right. There's a clean space inside me where the spectres of Angela and Corinne used to torment me and maybe Vicky's ghosts too have been laid to rest.

"Get chocolate and coke." Vicky says hopefully as I pack everything up.

"Spect so." I look at what's left of Jed's money. Just over a fiver.

I don't know where we're going or what will happen next. I don't know if Vicky will want to stay with me today, for a week or forever. I don't know how long we'll be able to travel together, how long till she gets picked up again and taken back to Meadowbank.

Just before we leave Vicky takes her mother's diaries from her pocket, scrapes a hole under a blackberry bush and covers them up. She smiles as she stands up and takes my arm.

hermitjackvicky go out of dark go down hill vicky see shop

hermitjack buy chocolate and coke

vicky see houses gardens people

blue bus come

hermitjackvicky get on

End.

Conclusion

The journey with the image of the feral child has not only produced this thesis with its critical and creative components, but has left its mark on the writer; a shift in perspective from concern with external events – how society reacts to those who don't conform to the norm - to the ambiguous inner world of the individual at the interface of society and the role of language in negotiating the border between inside and out.

Tracing the fictional feral child through eighteenth-century literature revealed the function of the image as a critical tool, used to challenge decadent social practices and institutions. It was also held up as an example of natural innocence to be emulated by reforming civil communities. While the literature of the time is often vitriolic in its attacks on established institutions, the causes of and remedies for the perceived corruption are not clearly identified, so that even the destruction of old hierarchies in the French Revolution failed to fulfil the expected promise of the regenerated man. The question of whether man can be human without civilisation continued to occupy philosophers and scientists of the time, being of grave concern to both Dr. J.M.G. Itard and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, although both arrived at different conclusions regarding the nature of man.

This question is still pertinent today, although the contemporary focus on language as the source of distortion of the 'real', at the same time as it attempts to interpret the

environment, centres attention on man as a partial being, forever doomed to negotiate between the language-defined, social self and the chaos of the 'real' to which the whole being belongs. Similarly, the recognition of the repressed, lost parts of the personality which have been sacrificed to the creation of the speaking subject permits consideration of the need for these parts to gain expression, to be re-united with the 'real'.

Such emphasis on negotiation avoids the extremes of romantic escape and militant confrontation. Wordlessness itself provides the conditions for both withholding and resistance. In the creative text, the very amorality and silences of the feral child are a subversive commentary in their own right, running between and beneath the recounting of concrete events which, at the level of the phenotext, in themselves may offer an explicit critique of social practice to complement the deeper resonance of the unspeakable.

These are the gifts I have gained from the complex image of the feral child, gifts which I have attempted to explore in the creation of my own fiction, in the construction of a poetics of wildness and in the journal commentary which has informed the production of this thesis.

If language is the prime factor in the construction of the social being, then literature must carry potential for change, for the refraction of all possibilities. In the community of writing many texts are produced which attempt to include plurality, the multiplicity of the real and as a body of writing these texts represent a real potential for social change. The image of the feral child presents one opening by which to access this potential, but it is only one and it is the duty of the writer to seek out and explore other means to the same end. This is not to say the image of the feral child is exhausted. It continues to walk alongside me like Ovid's child in Malouf's novel, but it will be joined by other images,

other ways of writing and, like Handke's *Kaspar*, it contains many personas to be taken up and explored by other writers.

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